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"I would question my role if I felt that mothering wasn't a part of it": mother practitioners' empathetic contributions to Early Childhood Education and Care.

Janet Anne Uwins

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education

Supervisor: Dr. Jools Page

October 2015



## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful and amazing granddaughter  
Chloe Imogen Timmins, born December 5<sup>th</sup> 2012  
whose natural curiosity about the world around her and pure joy of living has been  
my constant shining light.

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## Abstract

Throughout the last forty years, policy and practice in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England has increasingly demanded a strong and reciprocal partnership with parents. Family policy has become intertwined with ECEC policy with the drive to instil a standardised model of good parenting to facilitate the eradication of child poverty. As a result, ECEC practitioners have a responsibility to support good parenting; however, a uniform model of parenting does not reflect the socio-economic and cultural constructs of contemporary family life. The personal and professional roles of caring for babies and young children are naturally closely aligned, and many ECEC practitioners are parents themselves. This study investigated this perception, and asked the question: *'How might ECEC practitioners' experiences of mothering influence and inform their working practice with parents?'*

The research offers a psychosocial theoretical framework that embraces social theory alongside concepts from science that address the nature of close relationships. Seven mother practitioners, working in a range of professional roles within the ECEC sector, responded to in-depth e-mail interviews to describe their personal experiences of mothering and how these were translated in their professional roles with parents. By applying a constructivist grounded theory method of analysis, the findings highlighted the participants' mothering of their own children to be a natural and instinctive process highly influenced by their social and cultural worlds. Such a view conflicts with political rhetoric that supports a uniform model of good parenting. An empathetic approach was used when supporting parents, and through attentive listening, mother practitioners were able to combine personal experience with their professional theoretical knowledge and experience to tailor support and meet the needs of families.

The thesis concludes that the mother practitioners placed an intrinsic value on being a parent within their working roles, when combined with professional knowledge and experience facilitated empathetic relationships with parents. The study suggests that recognition is needed of the value of personal experiences, which can be capitalised upon more in ECEC policy and practice in order to respect contemporary constructs of family. Suggestions for further professional development, research and dissemination of the research findings are offered.

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

BTM	Birth to Three Matters framework
CACE	Central Advisory Council for Education
Care to Learn	A government scheme for funding childcare for students under the age of 20.
CGFS	Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
D32, D33	NVQ assessor awards
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECEC Practitioner	Any professional working directly with children from birth to six across a range of settings delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) that include schools, nursery schools, day care nursery provision, pre-schools, childminders and roles within Children's Centres
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYP	Early Years Professional: a graduate qualification considered to be equivalent to QTS.
FD or FDA	Foundation Degree, awarded after the first two years of degree level study, that can be topped up to a full Honours Degree after a third year.
INCO	Inclusion Co-ordinator
KPA	Key person approach: a legal requirement in ECE policy (DfE, 2014) whereby each child is assigned a practitioner as a 'key person' who forms a reciprocal relationship with the child and the family. The KPA aims to provide support for the child emotionally, physically and cognitively through a continuity of shared experiences from home to setting.
KS1	Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum
Mother practitioners	The participants in this study, who were mothers as well as ECEC practitioners
NNEB	Nursery Nursing Examinations Board qualification: a Level 3 equivalent qualification now historic
NQT	Newly qualified teacher
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification: a work-based qualification based upon skills and knowledge

PGCE	Postgraduate certificate in education
PVI	Private, voluntary and independent sector in child care and education
QTS	Qualified teacher status
SEN	Special educational needs
Y1/R	A mixed class found in some primary schools that combine Reception class children working in the EYFS with Year 1 children working in the first year of the National Curriculum

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There has been growing political focus and acknowledgement in England of the value to young children's learning and development when their parents are equal partners with providers of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (DfE, 2014; Pugh, 2010a). Onus has increasingly been placed upon ECEC practitioners to intervene and support the notion of 'good parenting' (DfE, 2014) when working with parents. Many practitioners are parents themselves, and although this fact is widely recognised and acknowledged in literature (Elfer *et al.*, 2012; Osgood, 2012; Wright, 2011), the contexts in which these references are made are varied. This study highlights the personal experiences of mothering that mother practitioners accumulate and examines how such experiences might impact upon and inform their working practice with parents. The primary research question asks:

*How might ECEC practitioners' personal experiences of mothering influence and inform their working practice with parents?*

This research question is purposefully broad, and generates two secondary questions:

- 1. What factors in the experience of mothering their own children help ECEC practitioners to understand the role parents play in their young children's learning and development?*
- 2. How do these factors influence the relationships that ECEC practitioners form with parents?*

The research inquiry for this thesis arose from a continued interest in the importance of involving parents in the care and education of young children in their early years. I embarked on my ECEC career as a voluntary parent helper in my children's pre-school. Once they had both settled into formal schooling I sought employment that would fit around the children and develop my knowledge and experience in the field. I worked as a practitioner in a range of ECEC settings and progressed to local authority advisory and teaching roles

alongside continued study. At the time of writing I have worked as an independent consultant and postgraduate researcher for ten years.

As a parent and practitioner I often found it easier to break down barriers when building partnerships with parents by sharing my mothering experiences if I felt they helped. However, very little research exists that focuses directly on such a concept. For example, the work of Whalley *et al.* (2013; 2012) at the Pen Green Centre in Corby has focused on breaking down barriers with disadvantaged families to build relationships with them and become research partners in their children's learning. Many parents have accessed learning, volunteering and employment opportunities at the centre. Gladstone and Donoyou (2013) suggest such a development gives parents 'the chance to give something back and to make use of their very often negative life experiences in as positive way. This (again) contributes to parents' growing self-esteem and confidence' (p.177). The suggestion of value in using personal experiences is therefore acknowledged by Gladstone and Donoyou (2013) but not explored in depth.

Sikes (1997) certainly found a link between parenthood and teaching in her research which grew from her personal experience, and she refers to the empathy that mother teachers have with other parents. This is particularly evident amongst primary school teachers who Sikes asserts apply a more gendered 'maternalistic' style of teaching than teachers of older children, which implies a feminine, motherly, caring approach. Similarly, Cole (2005; 2004), a teacher and mother of a child with special educational needs (SEN), sought to examine the experiences of six mother teachers in the same situation, working in primary and secondary education. Likewise, recent research by Broomhead (2013) found value in the addition of empathetic teaching approaches in pre-service training in order to prepare them for teaching children with special needs. Trainee teachers listened to the stories of parents and their children with SEN, to facilitate the generation of empathy.

The existing studies aforementioned share some aspects of this study, indicating that research has linked teaching with parenthood and the ability to empathise with parents. However, this study is situated in the field of ECEC, where care, in practice and policy (DfE, 2014), cannot be separated from education (Pugh, 2010b). When personal and professional

roles of caring for babies and young children in their early years are naturally closely aligned, research that focuses on how these two roles might be interrelated, in particular when working with parents, therefore has the potential to extend previous studies and make a contribution to the ECEC sector.

### ***Structure of the thesis***

In this **Chapter One** I introduce the research study.

In **Chapter Two**, I situate the thesis within a related body of literature that reflects a psychosocial theoretical framework. The policy context is set by providing a short history of the role of parents in their children's learning in England over the past four decades. I critique the ambiguous political rhetoric pertaining to 'parenting', and ask what makes a good parent, before arguing through feminist ideology for my preference of the term 'mothering'. The notion of 'othering', is addressed, defined as 'an unfair thinking habit' (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2011, p.62) whereby a person's own values, beliefs and practices are perceived as the accepted norm, and anything outside as unacceptable. I apply the term 'social class othering' with reference to differences in socio-cultural mothering practices. I introduce the social theory of Bourdieu (1986; 1985; 1977) and his concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital which provide a useful lens through which to observe the practice of social class othering. I then discuss the psychological and psychoanalytical aspects of a psychosocial framework, that focus on the science of social relationships evident in attachment behaviours, neuroscience and ethical care. Finally, I identify existing literature that makes reference to the value that mother practitioners bring to their professional roles (Page, 2014; Elfer *et al.*, 2012; Sagers *et al.*, 1994).

**Chapter Three** outlines the methodological framework and methods used, arguing for a narrative approach to the research design. I begin by describing how I went about 'purposeful selection' (Reybold *et al.*, 2013) of participants. This is followed by a discussion of my researcher positionality within the study. The decision to interview by e-mail is justified, and a constructivist grounded theory analysis is demonstrated to be appropriate for this study. Ethical considerations and dilemmas arising from the research methodology are finally discussed and addressed.

**Chapter Four** describes the data analysis process. In this chapter I demystify grounded theory terminology by providing my interpretation in relation to the analysis of the data in this study. I contend that the ongoing constant comparison feature of grounded theory data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was instrumental in the emergence of four interrelated categories: applying the essential ingredients of mothering; generating the secure base; listening to difference and problematising sector challenges. The fluidity of the categories establishes a synergy with a core category running through each one of 'exercising empathy'. In turn, the central concept, or grounded theory, of valuing the empathetic ECEC mother practitioner emerges.

**Chapter Five** discusses and interprets the research findings through presentation of the data in more detail. Participant responses are discussed in relation to the body of literature discussed in Chapter Two. Personal reflective research journal notes are used to add strength to the argument where fitting. The discussions are presented in the four categories identified through analysis in the previous chapter, with clear reference to the interrelatedness between them. The emerging concept of the value of the empathetic mother practitioner is finally presented.

In **Chapter Six** I present the conclusions and reflections arising from the research study, and revisit the research questions to contextualise them. This is followed by a statement of the contribution to knowledge and the implications of the research for ECEC policy and practice. Suggestions for dissemination and further research are offered. Critical reflections are made on the research process, and examine the methods and ethical practice, in particular pertaining to the use of e-mail as a medium for interviewing, and constructivist grounded theory analysis. Finally, I end the thesis with some closing personal reflection upon my doctoral learning journey.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

In this chapter I introduce and discuss my 'inquiry trail' (Wellington *et al.*, 2005, p.73), being the body of literature related to my research topic. The concept of a trail implies a pathway, route, or course, and in this chapter I propose to convey a developing rationale as I journey along my inquiry trail. To contextualise the study I begin with a factual summary of the socio-political arena of family, and working with parents in ECEC settings in England. I demonstrate how the ECEC political agenda has increasingly become intertwined with family and social policy over the last four decades. After setting the scene I examine the conflicting political rhetoric pertaining to family and parents in twenty-first century England, which leads to a critique of use of the term 'parenting' and the ambiguous concept of 'good parenting' (DfE, 2014, p.5). I then draw on feminist ideology to argue my preference for the term 'mothering' which I apply to this study, where mothering is a multidimensional endeavour of raising a child rooted in social theory and informed by science. I argue that a homogenous model of the 'good parent' conveyed in political discourse does not reflect the diversity of social and cultural nuances attributed to contemporary family life. Practice informed by ECEC policy promoting such a view disregards these subtle differences, and can inadvertently lead to the practice of 'othering', an unfair thinking habit about others who are different and do not conform to a perceived norm. In particular, I analyse what I term 'social class othering' by considering it through Bourdieu's social theory of habitus (1986; 1985; 1977). I follow with a discussion of the influences from science on relationships that explores advances in neuroscience, historical and contemporary attachment theory, and ethical care.

Finally, I conclude the review of the literature by placing the developing argument into the context of my line of inquiry, which is how parent practitioners might draw upon their personal experiences of mothering when supporting the families of the children they care for professionally. I discuss the limited literature available that touches on this subject.



## **Policy context: the role of parents in young children's learning and development**

ECEC in England has received increasing interest and attention by policy makers and researchers for over four decades, and by successive governments. Opposing political parties have alternated to take the position of power in a series of pendulum swings. In 1970 the Conservative party took control from Harold Wilson's Labour Government only to lose it after one term of office in 1974, but gained control once more in 1979 heralding Margaret Thatcher's three terms of leadership office. After Thatcher's resignation in 1990 the Conservative party led one more term of office following the general election of 1992, but lost power to 'New Labour' in 1997, which led to three consecutive terms of Labour Government. In the general election of 2010 a hung parliament led to the formation of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government with the Conservative David Cameron as Prime Minister. In May 2015 the Conservative Party won the general election with a clear majority, with David Cameron remaining in post as Prime Minister for a second term.

The effect of these swings has had an impact on the development of policy and services pertaining to ECEC, causing the sector to face continual reinvention and intensive levels of scrutiny with regard to regulation, prescription, and sector-specific qualification (Brooker, 2011; Nutbrown *et al.*, 2008). In particular, an increased and sometimes perplexingly contradictory spotlight has focussed on the role of parents in their young children's learning and development. The focus on involving parents more in The Plowden Report (CACE (England), 1967) was associated with the instigation of the expansion of nursery provision which continued through successive governments. The report recommended that nursery places in maintained nursery schools and day care nurseries, for children in the two years prior to statutory schooling, should be part-time; the reasons behind this were twofold. Firstly, it gave the message that children were best at home with their mothers, and secondly it would deter mothers from returning to work (Baldock *et al.*, 2013). However, it did not stop a steady rise in women returning to the workforce during the 1970s (Baldock *et al.*, 2013).

Sir Keith Joseph's three 'Cycle of Deprivation' speeches in 1972 and 1973 (Welshman, 2012) preceded a deeper political focus on family life, disadvantage and child poverty which became a key political driver in subsequent years by all governments. The key message from Sir Keith's research into the causes of poverty lay in his belief of the concept of 'intergenerational poverty' (Nelson *et al.*, 2013, p.9) in which poverty is passed on through generations 'via parents who (are) described as 'troubled' or 'problematic' (*ibid.*). This deficit view of parents continued when Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair (1999) made the commitment: 'Our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty, and it will take a generation. It is a 20-year mission but I believe it can be done' (p.1).

Integral to the Labour Party manifesto and the tackling of poverty was the introduction of the Sure Start initiative, launched in 1998, initially as an early intervention programme in areas of disadvantage. The original aim of Sure Start was to work with families and children under five to promote their development and learning 'so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of children' (DfES, 2001). Sure Start centres were designed to offer integrated services within pram-pushing distance that met local need by being managed at a local level, with parents actively involved on Sure Start boards (Eisenstadt, 2011). The original core services included outreach and home visiting; family support including parenting; good quality play, learning and childcare; healthcare and advice for parents and children; and support for children with special educational needs (SEN) (DfEE, 1999). The centres were first placed as trailblazers in the 20% poorest wards in the country (Eisenstadt, 2011) and then developed in phases with the 'longer term aim of 3,500 children's centres by 2010, one for every Community' (DES, 2005, p.3). However, as government opinion and funding changed over time, the original Sure Start model was modified (Casson, 2011, p.vi).

The push to increase the availability of affordable childcare with free part-time entitlement for three- and four-year-olds, was set in motion, in part as a means to enable women to return to work but also to facilitate *all* children's achievements by improving life chances and wellbeing (Pugh, 2010b). The avoidable death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié at the hands of her guardians in 2000 became the catalyst for reform with the introduction of the

*Every Child Matters: Change for Children* agenda (DfES, 2004b), legislated through the Children Act 2004 (HMSO, 2004). Change was promoted by 'the improvement and integration of universal services' (DfES, 2004b, p.4). *Every Child Matters* heralded the start of inter-sector partnership working, a new approach that would 'integrate all the work done with children and families on a continuum from universal services for all children to targeted work with the most vulnerable' (Owen and Haynes, 2010, p.200). The principal ambition of the *Every Child Matters* agenda was to 'improve outcomes for all children and to narrow the gap in outcomes between those who do well and those who do not' (DfES, 2004b, p.4). As a consequence, ECEC became drawn in to the wider socio-political agenda of the new millennium during the three Labour administrations, receiving over £20 billion government investment during this period (Pugh, 2010b). The Government introduced its '*Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*' in 2004 outlining how the vision should become reality. The strategy addressed three key principles:

1. ensuring every child has the best possible start in life;
2. the need to respond to changing patterns of employment and ensure that parents, particularly mothers, can work and progress their careers; and
3. the legitimate expectations of families that they should be in control of the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

(DfES, 2004a, p.5)

The contradictory message that parents need to be more involved in their children's development and learning alongside the drive for mothers to return to work is confusing. As Pugh (2009) notes, if mothers return to work, thus reducing child poverty, how can they fulfil what has been identified as best for children by staying at home during their young children's formative years? Putting choices into the hands of parents appears to grant them autonomy on the one hand but the associated spotlight on parenting in order to give children a good start in life contradicts this. In 2009, at a time of increasing global economic downturn, the Labour Government published '*Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare: Building on the 10-Year Strategy*' (DCSF, 2009) which further endorsed the key mixed messages for parents: work or stay at home with your children?

Simultaneously, a shift in government departmental management of Sure Start led to centres being returned to local authority control with the loss of ring-fenced funding. As a result, an increasing number of Sure Start Children's Centres have closed due to budgetary shortfall, predicted by Glass (2005), with more forecast to close (4Children, 2014).

The expansion of ECEC provision by the Labour Government to meet the needs of working parents generated scrutiny of what constituted high quality learning (Baldock *et al.*, 2013). The result was the introduction and continuing development of a regulated ECEC curriculum, the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS) (QCA, 2000) covering the three- to five-age range. Non-statutory guidance was made available for practitioners working with babies and children under three years within the *Birth to Three Matters* framework (BTM) (DfES, 2003). The latter framework was informed by extensive research into the particular nature of babies' and young children's learning (David *et al.*, 2003). Revision continued with the introduction of a regulatory framework, the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008) covering the entire birth- to five-age range, amalgamating the research-informed BTM framework (DfES, 2003) with the CGFS (QCA, 2000). The reinvented EYFS therefore aimed to integrate care and education, in recognition that learning and development are interrelated (Pugh, 2010b). The EYFS has undergone two further revisions and refinements under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition (DfE, 2014; 2012), during a critical time of political change and national economic recession (Baldock *et al.*, 2013). The revision, previously proposed by the Labour Government was inherited and reviewed by Dame Claire Tickell, Chief Executive of Action for Children, whose remit was to consider 'how (this) could be less bureaucratic and more focused on supporting children's early learning' (DfE, online, 2011b, no page number). The Tickell Report, *The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning* was published in March 2011 and drew on a wide body of related research (Tickell, 2011). After a public consultation period the revised framework was adopted and implemented from September 2012, with further amendments actioned in September 2014.

Research therefore has afforded a parallel driving force to ECEC and family policy reform which is instrumental in two areas: the importance of high quality learning, and a new emphasis on the role that parents play in their children's development (Pugh, 2010b). High

quality learning arises from provision where practitioners are equipped with the 'necessary skills, knowledge and understanding' (Nutbrown, 2012, p.5). The push towards quality provision delivered by an erudite ECEC workforce led to an independent review into the ECEC workforce qualification framework. *Foundations for Quality* (Nutbrown, 2012) made nineteen justified recommendations to the Government, of which only five have been accepted.

Two things are clear from this historical summary. Firstly, in successive government manifestos since 1997, a common focus has been on the overriding and continuing objective of improving outcomes for children and eradicating child poverty. Consequently the ECEC agenda has now become intertwined with social and family policy. Secondly, there is a steady progressive drive to empower parents to make informed choices and become engaged in their young children's learning and development. Macvarish (2014b) argues that the spotlight on family policy has now focused on parents as opposed to the child, thus transforming family policy from 'implicit to explicit' (p.79). The message Macvarish (2014b) conveys is that the concept of family then becomes a public issue when once it was a personal and diverse construct. As a result, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government pledged to 'put parents and families at the heart of services' (DfE, 2011a, p.7). This statement placed value, responsibility and power upon parental roles and conformed to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition vision of a 'Big Society' (Cameron and Clegg, 2010, p.8) which merged the Conservative plan for building strong families and social responsibility with the Liberal Democrat desire to protect civil liberties. The Government's belief was that 'strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society' (HM Government, 2010, p.19). The Coalition Government was formed at a challenging time when the major issues of economic hardship were reflected not only in increasing unemployment and rising public deficit, but also in terms of a wider arena of social crisis, family breakdown and risk to children (Churchill, 2011). It becomes difficult to place such heavy responsibility on families at a time when the very concept of 'family', as Cornford *et al.* (2013) suggest, is a 'notoriously complex and contested concept, a compound of social, legal and biological relationships' (p.4). What Cornford *et al.* (2013) allude to is the changing face over time of family make-up, cultures, and social norms that continually extend the array of legitimate relationships referred to as 'family'. As Rogoff

(2003) maintains, 'being human involves constraints and possibilities stemming from long histories of human practices. At the same time, each generation continues to revise and adapt its human cultural and biological heritage in the face of current circumstances' (p.3). This is not helped by the conflicting rhetoric of policy pertaining to family and parenting, which I will now discuss.

### **The conflicting political rhetoric of 'family' and 'parenting'**

Family life in England today is diverse, and to theorise on what constitutes 'family' is contentious, as family structures, cultures, practices and lived experiences are varied (Frost, 2011). It is clear from research that the home learning environment children are born into plays a significant part in their outcomes (Field, 2010; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, the richness of the home learning environment is not necessarily income-related (Field, 2010; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). As Sylva *et al.* (2004) assert, 'what parents do with their children is more important than who they are' (p.5), but Field identifies a troubling factor:

Since 1969 I have witnessed a growing indifference from some parents to meeting the most basic needs of children, and particularly younger children, those who are least able to fend for themselves. I have also observed how the home life of a minority but worryingly, a growing minority of children, fails to express an unconditional commitment to the successful nurturing of children.

(Field, 2010, p.16)

To me, Field's poignant observation, although alarming, should be received with appreciation of the word 'minority'. I suggest this minority includes those families referred to throughout the document *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011a) as 'vulnerable' (p.5; p.20); 'disadvantaged' (p.8; p.28; p.34); 'needy' (p.13); and those with 'extra needs' (p.14). Such loaded rhetoric, I argue, compares with Furedi's (2014) observation that parenting is '... represented as the source of virtually every social problem that afflicts our communities' (p.viii). As Furedi (2014) notes, contradictory messages are received when political rhetoric reveals 'most parents are doing a fine job of raising their children: before proposing another new policy or initiative that implicates inadequate parenting as the source of many of society's ills' (p.viii). Ball (2013) observes how when they

were in office both the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair and Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron made frequent references to education policy from the perspective of being a parent. Gewirtz (2001) criticised Labour's attempts to change the attitudes of working-class parents by dubbing it 'cloning the Blairs' (p.365), meaning transforming them into middle-class families similar to that of the Blairs. Moreover, Gillies (2005) examined assumptions made within policy about disadvantaged or marginalised parents by claiming that 'interventions designed to promote inclusion (thus) translate into support for ethical self-governance with the aim of encouraging uniformity' (p.71). I argue that policy, in an attempt to acknowledge socio-economic diversity, has in fact had the opposite effect with the aim to create family homogeneity through programmes of intervention aimed at promoting a standardised model of 'good parenting' (DfE, 2014, p.5), whatever that is meant to mean. Macvarish (2014b) proposes that by targeting *all* parents-to-be with the offer of free parenting classes in order to avoid stigmatising problem families also suggests '... that respectable, working families require training like anyone else' (p.92).

In ECEC, the importance of parents becoming actively involved in their children's development and learning has received increasing focus with the continuing recognition that parents are children's 'first and most enduring educators' (DCSF, 2008; DfES, 2003; QCA, 2000). However, as ECEC policy has become integrated into wider social and family reform, in the revised EYFS (DfE, 2014) the language pertaining to partnership with parents has been transformed to reflect implications of intervention. To illustrate, at the very start of the document is the statement 'Good parenting and high quality early learning together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up' (p.5). Following on, one of the principles of the EYFS reads: 'children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers' (p.6). The use of the term 'good parenting' has now infiltrated ECEC policy rhetoric, and when written in this way implies that not so good, or even bad parenting does not help children's life chances.

The role of the key person is described in the safeguarding and welfare requirements thus: '... to help ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs ... to help

the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents' (p.21). Earlier in the document, with reference to learning and development, it states: 'The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home. They should also help families to engage with more specialist support if appropriate' (p.10). Here, I suggest, through application of the word 'must', is evidence of the responsibility now placed upon ECEC practitioners to be a power that teaches parents how to engage with their children at home and promote their learning. I acknowledge that 'specialist support' also refers to children with identified additional needs and those whose home language is not English, but there is, too, tension in policy rhetoric in this respect. The EYFS (DfE, 2014) states, where there is cause for concern, 'practitioners must consider whether a child may have a special educational need or disability which requires specialist support' (p.9) and '...practitioners must assess children's skills in English. If a child does not have a strong grasp of English language, practitioners must explore the child's skills in the home language with parents and/or carers, to establish whether there is cause for concern about language delay' (p.9). Interestingly however, in the EYFS section pertaining to the Safeguarding and Welfare requirements in the first revision (DfE, 2012), the document refers to the requirement for a policy of equality of opportunity where practices 'should' be reviewed, monitored and evaluated to ensure 'the effectiveness of inclusive practices that promote and value diversity and difference: how inappropriate attitudes and practices will be challenged; and how the provision will encourage children to value and respect others' (p.26). I argue that the use of the word 'should' implies a lesser requirement than the previous interventionary 'must' and therefore places less weight as a requirement by ECEC practitioners. More worryingly, this statement, along with the need for an equal opportunities policy has been removed from the later revision (DfE, 2014). Such inconsiderate revision raises a question therefore whether diversity, particularly in the belief of 'good parenting', will be respected.

All ECEC practitioners therefore have indirectly been granted the onus of supporting the development of 'good parenting', regardless of the type of setting. If, as Pugh (2010b) contends, the revised EYFS (DfE, 2014; DfE 2012) was intended to integrate care and education, such a responsibility poses logistical challenges regarding consistency of parental support across sector provision. For example, literature over time has strongly indicated a



traditional caring role in childminding. Bruner (1980), writing about the Oxford Preschool Research Project which examined earlier choices of preschool provision stated: ‘...minders defined their role as ‘caring’ for rather than ‘educating’ or ‘stimulating’ the children’ (p.111). More recently, a wider NCB study conducted by Fauth *et al.* (2011) identified the most common theme to emerge remained one of ‘childminders’ ethos of caring’ (p.51), although it was found that through this ethic of care childminders do simultaneously provide for children’s learning. The earlier perception that childminding was purely about mothers wishing to care for their own children alongside other children at home and earn a small income (Bruner, 1980) has changed, particularly with the learning and development requirements within the EYFS (DfE, 2014). However, recent research indicates that parents often choose childminder provision because it is ‘homely’ (Brooker, 2014; Fauth *et al.*, 2013), implying a more domestic setting and with fewer children.

Additionally, a KPA in reception classes or nursery schools cannot be implemented in the same way as in pre-school settings with high adult:child ratios, when school legislation requires one qualified teacher to 30 children and nursery schools with a qualified teacher, one to 13 children (DfE, 2014). A study by Shields (2009), prior to the revised EYFS (2014; 2012), found that parents noted several aspects of difference in the partnership they formed with teachers when compared to nursery provision. Such disparities may remain due to separate legislative requirements. Supporting the ideal of ‘good parenting’ (DfE, 2014, p.5) consistently across the sector therefore is problematic and requires further political consideration.

### ***What makes a ‘good’ parent?***

I have demonstrated how ambiguous terminology appears in ECEC policy. Such language, when applied to parents as one homogeneous group, or from a binary perspective of good or bad parenting, convey deficit, subjective views of parenthood. Diversity of family life is disregarded and disrespected. Vincent (2000) notes that the child-rearing role of parents has swung from being viewed as a natural process to one that has to be learned and perfected. Lee (2014b) reinforces the progression of this view over time, where the value of maternal instinct has been replaced by the need to be taught a parenting skills set. Interventionary means with the aim to become perfect parents is evident in the plethora of

'parenting' programmes now available and aimed at all parents. Programmes such as *The Incredible Years* (Webster Stratton, 2006) and *Parents Plus Early Years* (Sharry *et al.*, 2013), as well as countless unknown independently created programmes available at local level has meant that what was once a private domain has now entered the public arena (Vincent, 2000). Parenting programmes create policy conflict by attempting to empower parents and encourage autonomy on one hand whilst conforming to the perfect accepted norm on the other. As Gillies (2005) argues, the 'emphasis on support represents a top-down projection of values and standards onto families, thereby supporting conformity rather than promoting access to parenting resources' (p.70). Furthermore, raising children has become an increasingly popular topic in the media, including magazines, books and television programmes such as *Supernanny* (Jensen, 2010). The consequence has been that families suffer from what I would describe as being 'all parented out' as a result of information overload from a multi-disciplinary range of 'experts' with different philosophical and psychological approaches. This 'polyvocality' (Jensen, 2010, p.176), or multiple 'voices' from opinions and beliefs, designed to enable parents to make informed choices about the way they 'parent' instead simply confuses and disparages. The real areas of support from which some families could benefit have been disregarded in favour of the belief that the root of the problem is simply that they need to be taught how to become good parents. The effect of this is devastating, especially for children. I argue that not only does it result in parents feeling incompetent and undermined but conflicting advice confuses them to the extent that they may withdraw further into the abyss of disadvantage.

The concept of being a 'good enough' parent can historically be attributed to Winnicott (1964), an English paediatrician and psychoanalyst, and Bettelheim (1987), an Austrian-born child psychologist. Winnicott (1964) asserted that mothers do not need to have any 'intellectual understanding' (p.189) of their role because it was good enough to be naturally devoted to their child. The implication was that nurturing a baby is innate, and that you do not have to be a perfect mother, but a 'good enough' one, based upon natural instincts, will suffice. Bettelheim (1987) considered Winnicott's belief further and strongly gave authority to being a 'good enough' parent. Bettelheim's aim was to encourage parents to think about their children from the perspective of their needs first and not adjust their parenting beliefs and skills as a result of feeling inadequate through advice given by 'experts' (1987, p.15).

Nevertheless, the perspectives of Winnicott (1964) and Bettelheim (1987), it could be argued, do not reflect the complexity and hardship that are present in some contemporary family constructs, and the strategies that families adopt to attempt to overcome them. Neither has the view of the naturally nurturing mother as 'good enough' remained, as evident in my growing argument. The political view that all mothers would benefit from being educated in the subject of child rearing is controversial, and one that I oppose in the context of this study. Furedi (2014) refers to 'so-called' bad parenting skills' (p.viii), where parents hold the blame for any difficulties that arise in their children's education, behaviour and poor health. Similarly, Lee (2014a) highlights the political inference that deficit parental behaviours must be addressed if children are to succeed in life and that parenting has to be learned. Such a belief conflicts with the historical views of Winnicott (1964) and Bettelheim (1987). However, Furedi (2008) acknowledges that there is a case for professional support for a minority of families, and that parents can learn a lot from experts, for example knowledge about health and nutrition (p.185). This study does not seek to deny this fact, but argues against parenting programmes that aim to deliver 'expert' advice about the nature of relationships between parents and children, make judgements about what is right and what is wrong, and teach a standardised set of perceived middle-class parenting skills. The concept of class, in particular perceived middle-class norms, is discussed in more detail later in the context of othering, and social class othering. I agree with Lee (2014b) who emphasises that parenting practices '... reflect the wider social and cultural context of the time ... the contemporary field ... is more diffuse, varied and extensive' (p.74) and Furedi (2008) who asserts 'How parents behave is informed by the cultural, moral, and social influences that bear down upon them' (p.188).

Every family is unique, and socio-cultural differences need to be clearly understood and respected by ECEC practitioners if they are to support parents with the more private and individual characteristics of raising a child; these cannot be taught by experts. Oates (2010) questions whether worldwide parenting programmes are 'sufficiently informed by the great variety of ways in which children are helped by their parents to live good lives' (p.ix). I suggest that Oates' caution is particularly significant in England, where family policy, as I have argued, is aimed at an ideal middle-class model of perfect parenting. Clarke and Hughes (2010) maintain this perspective has potential to 'problematise specific families,

without engaging with differences as sources of strength or resilience' (p.529). Gillies (2005) suggests that the nature of support is influenced by 'tacit moral judgements' (p.70) that are directed at attempting to include marginalised parents. The resulting social exclusion, Gillies (2005) argues, 'reframes' issues of poverty as they become detached from contrived conventional values and aspirations.

My argument is progressively highlighting the importance of acknowledging and respecting the differences of contemporary family life. Policy rhetoric cannot become reality. For ECEC practitioners, familiar with the sensitivities and benefits of working together through respectful relationships with parents (DfE, 2014), the added responsibility and interpretation of supporting 'good parenting' (p.5), could adversely be detrimental to children's holistic learning and development. The argument I have presented here regarding good parenting has highlighted negative interpretive connotations in such terms, and for that reason I prefer to apply the term 'mothering' in this study, which I now discuss.

### **'Mothering' as preferred terminology**

The majority of literature pertaining to mothering is rooted in American feminist ideology (Chodorow, 1999; Glenn, 1994; Ribbens, 1994). Whilst it is a valuable and relevant body, feminist discourses are wide-ranging; consequently, the argument that I present here draws on feminist literature specifically related to my preferred concept of mothering in this study. I argue that although women are exclusively and biologically designed for childbirth, the practice of mothering is not purely a feminine undertaking exclusive to the birth mother; fathers and other carers can, and do, mother. It is therefore not my intention to claim this research as a feminist study *per se*. Corresponding with Cooper and Roger's (2015) positionality, I have 'found broadly feminist theory and methods to be valuable in the exploration of mothering and education' (p.2).

Vincent (2012) believes policy documents use the terms 'parents' and 'parenting' to ensure that fathers are included. In a lecture entitled '*Parenting*' Vincent (2012) too voiced a preference for the word 'mothering', but on the simple premise that 'it is mothers who are generally positioned as retaining the ultimate responsibility for child-rearing in popular discourses and moral understandings' (p.4). This may be true, however Vincent is referring

to what Belenky *et al.* (1997) assert is: 'the traditional role for women' (p.13). Chodorow (1999) opened her seminal text on mothering with the words 'Women mother' (p.3). The view of mothering as the work of women arises from Chodorow's concept originating in Melanie Klein's (1932) psychoanalytic object relations theory, whereby the reproduction of mothering occurs naturally through social structures that trigger the psychological processes of nurturing. Through the close, nurturing relationship with the mother, the child develops a subconscious sense of identity in relation to 'objects', meaning people. The recollection of the mother, as object, in the child's psyche will enable them to feel 'invulnerable' (Chodorow, 1999, p.42) as a result of a 'nourishing and protecting maternal image, which is (now) experienced continuously whether or not its mother is actually there' (p.42). In this way, Chodorow believes the capacity for nurture is passed on from mother to daughter through their relationship, whereas it is inhibited and curtailed in the relationship between mother and son in preparation for a more traditional father-figure role. However, in a study in the Netherlands, Duindam and Spruijt (2002) apply Chodorow's (1999) theory to examine a parallel concept of the 'reproduction of fathering' (p.28). Their findings correlate with Chodorow's (1999) object relations theory of mothering. When fathers have received nurturing care from their own fathers, they have identified with them internally and acquired the capacity and motivation to care as fathers themselves. Duindam and Spruijt's (2002) findings also suggest that boys' sibling relationships with sisters may facilitate a nurturing capacity in the same way.

Although Chodorow (1999) believed that mothering was exclusive to women, mostly mothers, she disclaimed it as being biologically innate or an opportunity for 'role-training' (1999, p.7), whereby mothering skills are taught and passed down through generations of mothers. It seems however, that Duindam and Spruijt (2002), although referring to the process as 'fathering' (p.28), are describing Chodorow's (1999) object relations concept of mothering. For that reason, under the right conditions, I suggest the nurturing process of mothering can be applied by people of either gender, related or unrelated. Although object relations theory is one perspective, the recognition of nurture as implicit in mothering is significant.

Glenn (1994), like Chodorow (1999), believes that mothering is a social and not a biological construct, but maintains the view that mothering can be simply defined as one person caring for another. Similarly, Arendell (2000) argues that not all women mother, and agrees the nurturing and caring work of mothering is not exclusive to mothers. Arendell (2000) calls for further research into understanding mothering, the nature of multiple relationships, and the related social and structural contexts. Glenn (1994) perceives mothering as a variable relationship influenced by historical and cultural actions that can vary in terms of the material and cultural resources available, and so challenges Chodorow's view of it as a process exclusive to mothers or women. I suggest that Glenn's (1994) assertion applies in contemporary society, particularly in England in the context of family and ECEC policy. The government drive to encourage women to return to work, (Baldock, 2013; DfES 2004a) and the professional role of the practitioner in supporting parenting bears the consequence that babies and young children spend increasing amounts of time with people other than their birth, adoptive or foster mother. Mothering then becomes a shared activity, as indeed it is in some cultures (Wane, 2000). In the case of ECEC practitioners working with babies and young children, mothering behaviour therefore becomes an essential element in order to support the family by providing a continuum of care and fulfilment of the nurturing role that is vital for healthy learning and development (Cozolino, 2014; Degotardi and Pearson, 2009).

Some feminist perspectives oppose Chodorow's (1999) exclusivity of mothering to women and argue the case for men mothering (Unger, 2010; Ehrensaft, 1990). Frey (2003) believes that 'the contribution males can and should make to their children's development is precisely the same contribution that females make to their children's development, which is the ongoing care and nurturing of a human life' (p.56). Frey (2003) here argues for joint responsibility of the nurturing role in family constructs that allow it, but also recognises that mothers and fathers do also contribute unique qualities. Similarly, Ruddick (1989) argues that mothering is 'potentially work for men and women' (p.40). Unger (2010) notes that parental roles in America have increasingly become shared. It is clear that gender roles in contemporary England are changing too, with the complexity of family life. For example, from April 2015, new laws were passed to enable shared parental leave in the first year of a child's life (Gov.uk, 2015).

I have defended my justification for the preferred use of the word 'mothering' as opposed to 'parenting', drawing on the relevance of my preceding discussions of the current English socio-political arena in relation to the ECEC and family agendas. Rhetoric pertaining to parents and parenting is misleading and contradictory, and does not reflect the multiplicity of influences on the lives of families in England (or indeed elsewhere) today. I therefore argue that in the context of this study, the term 'mothering', denotes nurturing behaviours in which a parent or other adult or sibling primarily cares for a child. These behaviours will not demonstrate uniformity, but instead, I have argued, will reflect contemporary family life.

The argument thus far has repeatedly acknowledged the complexity of contemporary social and cultural family life. I suggest that if ECEC practitioners in England are to support families with their children's development and learning, interpretations of policy have the potential to generate a set of values and beliefs that can trigger the unfair practice of 'othering' in particular what I term 'social class othering'. Literature demonstrates that social class othering does occur, and I examine this through the lens of Bourdieu's social theory and concept of 'habitus' (1986; 1985; 1977).

## **Othering and otherness**

Mac Naughton and Hughes (2011) refer to othering as 'an unfair thinking habit' (p.62) whereby a person views their own or their own group's set of values, beliefs and practices as the accepted norm; any other perspectives are perceived to be deviations from the norm. In ECEC, this has potential to create barriers when building relationships with parents, and more so with implications of providing parenting support. At the same time, it is acknowledged in the literature that parents are not a homogenous group (Whalley *et al.*, 2013; Draper and Duffy, 2006). In attempting to embrace diversity, however, ECEC practitioners may be at risk of misinterpreting the beliefs, values and practices of others as they make unfounded guesses and assumptions about new and dominant cultures; what Lahman and Park (2004) refer to as 'tentative precarious connections' (p.140). Practitioners then become in danger of representing difference out of context, for example with the use of popular multicultural resources that represent assumed cultures. Teaching children about

difference in this example of multiculturalism equates to delivering a 'tourist curriculum' (Derman-Sparkes *et al.*, 1989, p.7) where practitioners plan for children to briefly 'visit' other cultures and then return to the dominant culture of the setting. Research by Barn *et al.* (2006) found that most parents, regardless of their ethnic background and socio-economic status, want to be involved in their children's lives. However, maintaining cultural and religious family traditions were highly 'rooted within the minority status paradigm that 'seemed to be a key 'push' factor for identification and refuge within 'own group' cultural practices' (p.60).

The educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia in Italy views the child as a subject of rights, who explores the environment and learns through symbolic representation (Edwards *et al.*, 2011). Children express themselves through 'all their "languages", including the expressive, communicative, symbolic, cognitive, ethical, metaphorical, logical and relational' (Edwards *et al.*, 2011, p.7). Relationships between practitioners, parents and children are highly collaborative. Carlina Rinaldi (2006), President of Reggio Children, asserts that working with parents can only be productive if practitioners educate themselves to recognise otherness. Such education would involve 'listening' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.126) to differences and accepting how their own views may change as relationships with others grow. Rinaldi stresses this would involve 'letting go of any truths that we consider to be absolute, being open to doubt and giving value to negotiation as a strategy of the possible' (p.140).

Kline (1999) refers to attentive listening as 'enzymatic' (p.37) when the quality of listening is the effect of the listener on the speaker. In other words, giving one's full attention with, as Kline (1999) suggests, 'palatable respect and fascination' (p.37) enables the speaker to feel confident in sharing perspectives. Similarly, Schwandt (2007) supports this view, maintaining that the scrutiny of other people's lives involves 'being prepared for the other to speak to us' (p.215), the resulting dialogue becoming the roots from which mutual understanding grows. Fine (1994), writing about the relationship between researcher and informant, coins the phrase 'working the hyphen' (p.70), referring to the hyphen as a metaphorical bridge, between Self-Other, where self and other are 'knottily entangled' (*ibid.*) at the hyphen. Researchers struggle when working the hyphen, opting to write *about* those they have othered instead of conveying the struggle they have had in engaging *with* their informants



(Fine, 1994, p.72). Fine believes writing *about* others denies the hyphen, whereas working *with* them generates richer data. She asserts: 'Eroding the fixedness of categories, we and they enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate' (Fine, 1994, p.72).

Krumer-Nevo (2002) offers a contrasting perspective. Also referring to the relationship between researcher and researched, he suggests an 'arena of othering' (p.303) exists in which the self and the other interact in a reciprocal relationship. Each has an awareness of the other, but only in terms of the power gap that separates and defines them. Krumer-Nevo (2002) asserts 'this is especially so when the researcher belongs to the middle class while the researched belongs to a lower class, or to a very low class' (p.305). A struggle results for and about social definition where 'the tendency towards a superficial, one-sided perception of the other is mutual' (p.308). By this Krumer-Nevo (2002) believes that each views the other stereotypically, colouring their perception. They are both othering the other, which facilitates a power relation between researcher and researched. Krumer-Nevo's (2002) solution to this disparity is to find ways to resist othering throughout the research process. Fine's (1994) analogy of 'working the hyphen' (p.70) does not resist othering, it respects difference and, I argue, can be equally applied to Rinaldi's (2006) concept of 'listening to difference' (p.11) in ECEC practice with parents. However, I suggest that if some practitioners' interpretations of ECEC policy in supporting good parenting is reflected in their practice there is a danger that an 'arena of othering' (Krumer-Nevo, 2002) would develop and a power relation between practitioner and parent would be cultivated where the practitioner was the expert and parent the lesser person in need of good parenting training. The opportunity to 'work the hyphens' (Fine, 1994) and 'listen to difference' (Rinaldi, 2006) could therefore present a challenge. Mother practitioners, on the other hand, already armed with their own experiences of mothering, may be better placed to appreciate difference and listen to parents, and therefore be more confident to 'work the hyphen' (Fine, 1994) *with* parents.

Othering can occur anywhere there is a perceived difference, and is not exclusive to cultural or religious diversity. Lahman (2008) argues that inherent differences render any relationship 'always othered' (p.286), and whilst this can be said in respect of the individualisation of all lives, valuing difference and coming to an understanding and

acceptance through dialogue can only serve as a strong foundation on which to build relationships with parents. In ECEC discourse and policy practitioners are expected to acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual child (DfE, 2014). As a result, the potential for predisposed otherness is present with every child and family that a practitioner encounters, and not just those with 'visible' difference by measures of socio-cultural or religious difference, additional need or disability. Vincent *et al.* (2008) refer to a Sure Start worker who suggested use of the term 'working class' raised similar issues of disrespect to the unaccepted use of the word 'coloured'. Lane (2008) clarifies how the term 'coloured' was once used widely, however in contemporary times this has 'a significant association with colonialism, slavery and apartheid' (p.74) and as a result is used less in favour of the term 'black'. Research by Cottle and Alexander (2014) found that practitioners' perceptions of quality in parent partnerships were highly influenced by policy discourses, frequently referring to parents in their settings as 'middle class' or 'working class', defined by such words as 'professional' and 'affluent' in the case of the former and 'needy', 'vulnerable' and 'deprived' to represent those parents of lower socio-economic status. Such views, as Cottle and Alexander (2014) assert, indicate a deficit view of particular groups of society. Consequently it is clear how policy discourses have potential to influence social class othering and the consequential effects of prejudice and marginalisation of some parents.

### ***Social class othering through a Bourdieusian lens***

Social class is another critical arena in which families can be marginalised and perceived to be outside the accepted norms of the dominant model. Class is a vast and contentious field in itself and has generated a wide-ranging body of literature and research. For that reason discussion pertaining to class in this chapter is addressed within the parameters of my study; specifically in the context of what I term 'social class othering' relating to parents and the ways they raise their children. In particular I draw on literature and research pertaining to the current perceived divide between 'working-class' and 'middle-class' families.

In Duncan's (2005) examination of class theories with reference to life choices made by mothers, he asserts that although class distinctions in material terms are significant, class does not feature as a 'self-conscious social identity' (p.73) where people do not consider themselves in terms of middle class or working class. For example, a study of middle-class

groups in Manchester (Savage *et al.*, 2005) found research participants frequently referred to themselves as 'ordinary' (p.34) when asked to identify themselves in terms of class. Duncan (2005) considers the paradox of class in terms of mothering, suggesting from his research that the ways in which mothers make choices about combining work and caring for their children, dividing labour with their partners, and choosing childcare involve the more subtle social characteristics of preference and rationality that do not conform with perceptions of clear-cut class divides. These nuanced differences were found 'through career as an identity, through biographical experience, through relationships with partners and through the development of normative views in social networks' (Duncan, 2005, p.50). Vincent (2012) draws on her extensive research with families to unpick contemporary parenting, particularly in relation to class and parents' engagement with schools, teachers and childcare services. Whilst she found material differences between middle and working-class families, she also acknowledges the split is simplistic. Vincent (2012) applies her categorisation in relation to three indicators of status: occupation, education and housing (p.3). I suggest that these features hold what Duncan (2005) recognises as 'ample evidence of marked social and economic inequalities' (p.50), and correlates with his recognition of the existence of a material distinction of class, despite his aforementioned research findings. Vincent (2012) however, appreciates that such a class division may differ from individuals' perceptions of class, and determining which class you fall into can raise 'discomforts and ambivalences' (p.4). In a recent study of parenting in perceived 'middle-class' black Caribbean families Vincent *et al.* (2013) found research respondents did not identify with this classification, reserving this status to refer to white families whose values and attitudes they did not wish to share. As Vincent *et al.* (2013) point out, this illustrates an interrelatedness between race and class in certain contexts, and compares with Duncan's findings (2005) that the concept of class is a paradox. It is in such contexts and within Vincent's constructs of the middle/working-class divide that I argue the case that social class othering occurs in ECEC settings when there is a conflict between the accepted norm and the other.

The developing argument here can be examined in the context of Bourdieu's social theory and concepts of 'habitus', 'cultural capital' and 'field' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986; 1985; 1977). The social world which humans inhabit can be viewed as

comprising a 'multi-dimensional space of positions' (Bourdieu, 1985, p.724). These positions or 'fields' (*ibid.*) can be social groups, institutions, family, friends, or, for example, the ECEC profession. Bourdieu (1977) writes: 'The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (p.72). Here Bourdieu refers to dispositions as the values and ways of working and behaving, and the perceptions of the different groups or fields. These dispositions can be exchanged across fields which collectively produce the systems of habitus. Habitus therefore can impact upon forms of capital and affect power relations across the fields. Forms of capital can be economic, social or cultural and are interrelated. Bourdieu (1986) maintained that cultural capital exists in three forms: the *embodied* state, the *objectified* state, and the *institutionalized* state. The *embodied* form is linked to the body, so is characteristic in terms of culture, cultivation, beliefs and cultural codes (p.5). The *objectified* form is more material in terms of cultural artefacts, writing, monuments and such (p.7). The *institutionalized* form refers to education, and academic qualifications (p.3). I suggest that Bourdieu's (1986; 1985; 1977) theories succeed in dissolving such clear-cut binaries as middle and working class, by showing that habitus and forms of capital are dynamic processes, that interrelate and reproduce social difference.

Bourdieu, however, is not without his critics, who assert that his social theory conveys meanings of structure, and dismisses individual agency and subjectivism (Couldry, 2005; Brubaker, 1985). Sullivan (2002) provides a critique of Bourdieu's concepts, repeatedly claiming that his theory of social and cultural reproduction is theoretically incoherent and unhelpful to empirical research, although the concept of cultural capital can be useful when applied to educational attainment and class limitations. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the structures of habitus in the different fields does involve individual thinking, but only that which is '... lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence' (p.85). I translate this to imply that Bourdieu (1977) structures social groups as having shared social and cultural values and conditions of existence that have been established over time. However, if the 'transposable dispositions' (p.72) from other social groups one inhabits can transform and reproduce the habitus, I can see why Sullivan (2002) identifies vagueness, as such a concept seems to recognise

individual agency. For example, Couldry (2005) highlights the influence on social categories that media and popular culture can have on the individual and the habitus.

Other researchers have offered further adaptations of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts to suit their studies. For example, Huppatz (2009) refers to 'feminist Bourdieusian scholarship' (p.45) which suggests a gendered capital in terms of feminine and female capital; and the notion of a 'vocational habitus' (Vincent and Braun, 2011; Colley *et al.*, 2003) has been proposed. Students attending vocational courses, including childcare, in Further Education colleges develop dispositions when 'learning cultures and the vocational cultures in which they are steeped transform those who enter them' (Colley *et al.*, 2003, p.471).

In this thesis, however, where the research questions do not reflect a feminist study nor explore professionalism *per se*, like Sullivan (2002), I acknowledge the usefulness of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital that researchers, for example Reay (1998b), have associated with educational attainment. Additionally, Reay's (2015) scrutiny of later writing by Bourdieu (2007; 2000), found evidence of an array of emotions, expressly in the account of his own education and social mobility in '*Sketch for a Self-Analysis*' (Bourdieu, 2007). Bourdieu himself writes in the front of this book 'A sociological analysis excluding psychology, except for some moods' (2007, no page number). Perhaps this is indicative of Bourdieu's inner struggle with the recognition of his own emotions as individual. Reay (2015) suggests that the concept of habitus helps to see links between individuals' inner emotional worlds and external social and structural processes (p.22).

Duncan's (2005) aforementioned research findings can be viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's theory. Mothers draw on their values and beliefs across the fields they inhabit in order to apply rationality and/or preference when making their choices. From Bourdieu's perspective, these mothers crossed class boundaries to draw on the views and values present in the habitus of their wider social circles. Similarly, in Vincent's (2013) findings regarding middle-class black Caribbean families' perception of middle class as a status bestowed only on white families whose embodied cultural capital, in terms of different cultural codes, they did not wish to share now becomes clearer. In an earlier research project led by Vincent (1996), outreach workers from a local authority inner city Parent

Centre in England working with families of children at local primary schools considered that teachers had a deficit view of some parents, particularly working-class parents. The workers believed they themselves were perceived as 'troubleshooters' or even 'troublemakers' (p.140). These beliefs can be understood by considering the values and perceptions contained in the collective habitus of the teachers. I suggest the teachers had in their habitus views of a 'normative' middle class and they draw on their cultural capital in terms of power in their academic position to arrive at their judgements.

In a similar study at the time by Reay (1998a) mothers from both middle and working-class backgrounds were found to be engaged in and supporting their children's learning. The difference was not in the level of involvement by working-class mothers but in the cultural capital available to them. Reay (1998b) adapted Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and applied it to her research. She identified seven characteristics that identify with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital:

- Material resources;
- Educational qualifications;
- Available time;
- Information about the educational system;
- Social confidence;
- Educational knowledge;
- The extent to which entitlement, assertiveness, aggression or timidity characterized mothers' approaches to teaching staff.

(Reay, 1998b, p.59)

As a result of differences in these characteristics of cultural capital Reay (1998b) concludes that the working-class women were unable to challenge teachers on any perceived deficits in their children's education. The lack of embodied, objectified and institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985) disempowered them.

In an English study in 1984, Tizard and Hughes (2002) confirmed a rich language environment in the homes of working-class families that promoted children's learning. The study compared children's learning at home with nursery school. In the context of the home environment, and their own habitus, children felt more able to sustain conversations and

ask more questions than at school, where the teaching strategies were in the main through a direct question/answer strategy. Teachers' 'cognitive demands' were pitched at a lower level demonstrating pre-conceived assumptions (p.186). Rich transcripts of conversations with mothers at home during imaginary play scenarios revealed learning in all areas of development. Tizard and Hughes (2002) suggest their findings challenged the theory that working-class children underachieve due to a language deficit at home. The teachers' social class othering as a result of their habitus may have been the reason for the assertion that 'the working-class children were already appearing at a disadvantage in nursery school' (p.196).

The narratives of the research I have presented here in my developing argument tell persistent stories. Through a social theoretical lens it can be identified that parents from perceived working classes are disadvantaged in terms of restraints within their cultural capital. The social class othering played out by teachers who hold in their habitus values and beliefs of a middle-class accepted norm is concerning. However, a small-scale research project in association with the Sheffield REAL Project (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2005) I suggest, is an example of empowering parents and raising their cultural capital. Bilingual Pakistani families received home visits and resources to help their children's literacy development. Evaluation of the project (Hirst *et al.*, 2010), indicated high take-up and participation with no dropout. Participating children showed marked improvement in literacy in comparison with a control group. It is pertinent to add that although this project suggests 'working the hyphens' (Fine, 1994, p.70) to break down the barriers of othering, it could be perceived that provision of an early literacy programme itself sets a middle-class norm, particularly as Hirst *et al.* (2010) in their evaluation of the project, stress that 'it was *believed* that working with parents, using the methods in the study would make a difference to children's early literacy development – believed but it was not *known*' (p.87). Beliefs are perceived by Bourdieu (1986) as dispositions in the habitus, and I have argued that the beliefs of some teachers can instigate social class othering and facilitate a power relationship. However, Hirst *et al.* (2010) address this issue by asserting that power relations were indeed considered, but were minimised by 'working closely with a member of the local community, working at good relationships and developing mutual trust' (p.205). Here I suggest is evidence of 'working the hyphen' (Fine, 1994, p.70) and 'listening

to difference' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.126) in order to create a mutually respectful working partnership. This example demonstrates possibilities, that some families, given the opportunity to become empowered to develop their cultural capital is a marked difference from those families marginalised by lack of respect due to social class othering.

Although the examples given here of social class othering arose some years ago, I argue that they are still poignantly visible and even more apparent today. Osgood (2012) acknowledges frequent references from feminist literature (Skeggs, 2003, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997; 1990; and Steedman, 1986; 1982) where working-class women, in particular mothers, have been 'marked as other' (p.91) from a middle-class set of values and beliefs. Her own study explores the professional identities of nursery workers in three London nurseries. Osgood (2012) reflects on the polarised viewpoints of working-class nursery workers who recall their childhoods as outside the accepted middle-class norms. She argues that as practitioners though, these women work within strong ECEC principles and ideals influenced by a dialogue of 'children's 'needs' and the relational discourses about 'good enough' mothering that abound in developmental psychology' (p.91). From this perspective Osgood (2012) asserts that as professionals these women are located within the authoritative framework that facilitates the 'normalised middle-class white model' (p.91). This illustrates the interplay between fields, culture and class (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition however, Osgood (2012) found it revealed the 'pain and vulnerability' when positioned as 'other' (p.92). When practitioners work with parents I suggest that they can sometimes be subconsciously guilty of social class othering, but also, as demonstrated, have experiences of their own where they may have indeed been othered: such experiences I argue that may be of value in understanding difference and empathising with parents that they work with.

I have discussed how political rhetoric conveys conflicting messages directed at parents and families, addressed the associated perception of 'good parenting', and how this infiltrates the work of the ECEC practitioner. I suggest that social class othering is clearly evident in the language, texts and themes of family and ECEC. The aspects of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985), further developed by Reay (1998b) are useful markers, more so during periods of national recession and hardship.



However, neither mothering nor the work of the ECEC practitioner sit exclusively within a social theoretical framework. Each of them exist in a psychosocial relational milieu. Increasingly, contemporary thought considers a psychosocial perspective (Reay, 2015; Taggart, 2014; Degotardi and Pearson, 2009), where the nature of socio-cultural relationships is at the same time shaped by influences from biology and psychology. I now turn to the sciences to discuss this element, in the context of influences from neuroscience, attachment theory and the practice of ethical care.

### **The influence of science on relationships: contributing to a contemporary psychosocial theoretical perspective**

In this section, I consider the influences from science: developments in neuroscience and understanding the brain, the psychological influences from attachment theory, and the subject of ethical care, which involves affective behaviours linked to both attachment and neuroscience.

#### ***Learning from neuroscience***

Developments in neuroscience with the advent of brain imaging have helped understanding of the link between brain development, affection and learning (Swaab, 2014; Cozolino, 2014; 2006; Graham, 2008). As Graham (2008) asserts, 'the brain is a social organ, developed and changed in interactions with other brains' (p.3). Eye gaze and contact is fundamental for social communication (Cozolino, 2006). The brain's plasticity at birth (Gerhardt, 2014; Swaab, 2014; OECD, 2007) allows a flexibility that is influenced by interactions with the environment *and* people, particularly the close nature of the relationship between infant and mother, or main carer. It is wired up ready to support the formation and development of neural circuitry (Tayler *et al.*, 2007). Sensory experience causes neurons to be activated which in turn lead to synaptic growth, fundamental to cognitive, physical-motor, linguistic, social, cultural and emotional development (*ibid.*). Therefore, sensory stimulation through touch, smell, sight, sound and taste feeds a baby's brain, and these experiences, which include the loving and secure experiences of mothering, are essential for learning. Gerhardt (2014) supports this view, arguing that the emotional aspects of social relationships with babies, those of affection and love, are essential for

cognitive growth. Robinson (2003) agrees, and draws attention to love as initially being a 'one-way system' (p.9) from parent to baby, before the baby can learn to love in return. Graham (2008) refers to the nature/nurture aspects of the brain where both depend upon interaction to develop; nature in terms of genetic programming and developmental milestones in learning to walk, talk and such, and nurture in terms of emotional learning, developed through neurons in the limbic system (*ibid.*). Graham (2008) asserts that caregivers activate the growth of the limbic regions of the brain – through emotional availability and reciprocal interactions. Therefore, it would seem plausible that contributions from neuroscience would play a significant role in developing ECEC practice and policy with reference to the attachment relationships that all carers form with babies and young children. However, it is argued that neuroscience has now infiltrated family policy rhetoric in relation to good parenting, and has been misinterpreted by policy makers (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Macvarish, 2014a; Meins, 2014).

Macvarish (2014a) refers to the culture of 'neuromania' (p.165) through which related brain claims have been made, in particular by policy makers influenced by research (Moullin *et al.*, 2014; Allen, 2011). Research maintains that the conception to age two period is critical because firstly '... the brain achieves its optimum development and nurturing during this peak period of growth' (Leadsom *et al.*, 2014, p.3); secondly, that 'A lack of appropriate experiences can lead to alterations in genetic plans' (Allen, 2011, p.13), and thirdly, that 'with the right early parenting, children develop a secure attachment to their mothers and fathers, a base from which they can thrive' (Moullin *et al.*, 2014). It is easy then to deduce how messages from research become construed to imply that unless babies and young children receive certain experiences within a small window of opportunity in their formative years, their brains will never recover. The finger of blame here is firmly pointed at parents, with the resulting impact that 'the 'new science' is likely to form an additional layer to the existing culture on intensive parenting rather than independently revolutionise the way parents think about their role' (Macvarish, 2014a, p.182). This argument develops and strengthens my earlier discussion in relation to the political rhetoric of 'family' and 'parenting'.

Brain claims and misrepresentation from neuroscience have infiltrated ECEC policy and practice and have been challenged by neuroscientists themselves (Edwards *et. al*, 2015). For example, the image of differences between two 3-year-old children's brains depicting a 'normal' brain and a brain that suffered 'extreme neglect' by Perry (2002) has appeared in ECEC literature, not least on the front cover of the Report *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (Allen, 2011). When interviewed, Frank Field, MP, described the two brain scans as 'a brain that's loved and nurtured and one that isn't' (Edwards *et. al*, 2015, p.174). In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper (Williams, 2014), researcher Val Gillies is quoted as saying: 'There are no details given of the case histories of those kids. We don't know what 'normal' was. We don't know what 'extreme neglect' was ... except for the fact that (it) meant life in a Romanian orphanage' (p.3).

Macvarish *et al.*, (2015) assert that if parents are guided by 'neuroscientifically-informed expertise' (p.264) there is no confidence in maternal instinct. Bowlby's (1969) legacy of attachment theory was developed prior to advances in neuroscience, and for that reason, I turn to the original roots and contemporary thinking on attachment, to further explore this concept and how it may impact upon ECEC practitioners' work with parents.

### ***Attachment theory***

According to Bowlby (1965), attachment is an emotional bond between mother and child, and this close dyadic relationship was deemed to be essential for healthy mental development. Bowlby (1965) originally claimed that to be deprived of a maternal bond would lead to the child suffering varying levels of personality disorder culminating in 'symptoms of neurosis and instability of character' (p.14). However, over the years, Bowlby did change his perspective to consider the importance of substitute primary attachment figures and multiple secondary attachments as playing an equally important role for promoting healthy development.

A colleague of Bowlby's, Mary Ainsworth, influenced his thinking. Ainsworth (1969b) drew on object relations theory (Klein, 1932) to study different attachment patterns, by setting up an experiment she referred to as 'The Strange Situation' (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978; Ainsworth and Bell, 1970). She observed how young children behaved when separated from their

mothers and later reunited with them, and believed that secure and insecure attachment patterns were a direct product of the way the mother or prime attachment figure had cared for them (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978). The Strange Situation was part of the Baltimore Longitudinal Project (Ainsworth, 1969a), in which Ainsworth designed a set of scales that measured maternal sensitivity, which was applied during extended naturalistic observations of mothers' interactions with their infants. The study concluded that the most sensitive mothers were accessible to their infants and aware of their 'more subtle communications, signals, wishes and moods' (Ainsworth, 1969a, p.4) and were an indication of secure attachments.

Osgood (2012) believes that the 'empathy, interpretation, and prompt and appropriate responsiveness' (p.93) theorised as elements of good, sensitive mothering renders it a 'myth' by creating a 'hegemonic norm' that disregards such issues as race and culture that can represent 'othered mothering' (p.94). Meins *et al.* (2001) offer a similar but alternative viewpoint of maternal sensitivity more suited to the theoretical stance of this study. Ainsworth's (1969a) original concept of maternal sensitivity focused on the 'appropriateness' (p.4) of maternal interactions: namely not only reading signals from the child's behaviour but responding to them in the *appropriate* manner. Meins (1997) refers to this appropriateness as 'mind-mindedness' (p.140), whereby the mother, in effect, gets into the mind of the child to understand their needs and respond in the *appropriate* way. Meins maintains that it is the mother's 'proclivity', or inclination towards mind-mindedness that is crucial in sensitive mothering (*ibid.*). More recently, Meins (2013) developed her theory of mind-mindedness further, with a reanalysis of her original data (Meins *et al.*, 2001). She reconsidered her concept of mind-mindedness in terms of maternal sensitivity, describing it as 'caregivers' attunement to their infants' internal states' (p.524). Meins' (2013) focus was on Ainsworth's (1969a) original concept of the *appropriateness* of maternal sensitivity, being the 'more subtle communications, signals, wishes and moods ... these mothers accurately interpret their perceptions and show empathy with their infants' (Ainsworth, 1969a, p.4). Meins' (2013) reassessment of maternal sensitivity includes the consideration of attuned or non-attuned maternal comments related to the infant's feelings and thoughts, which Ainsworth (1969a) did not take into account. The research of Meins *et al.* (2012) has found that across the sample, mind-minded comments were not consistent predictors of

secure or insecure attachment. Using appropriate and non-attuned mind-related comments 'make independent contributions towards attachment and suggest that mind-mindedness is best characterised as a multidimensional construct' (Meins *et al.*, 2012, p.394). In other words, despite Ainsworth's (1969a) original findings demonstrating sensitive mothering to be an indicator of secure or insecure attachment patterns, the comments made by mothers during interactions with their infants adds a further dimension that can reflect such issues as cultural and social contexts, and so offers a new perspective of attachment relationships.

From Ainsworth's studies Bowlby (1998) devised the concept of a secure base, in which a child can explore the world around them safe in the understanding that an attachment figure, as the secure base, is close by to reassure and respond to the child's needs emotionally, physically and cognitively if necessary (Bowlby, 1998). The concept of a secure base underpins ECEC policy and practice (DfE, 2014), through the KPA, which has been described as individual children and individual practitioners forming a close attachment, and the practitioner forming a personal relationship with the child's family (Elfer *et al.*, 2012). However, research indicates that in practice, particularly with babies and children under three, the KPA is fraught with emotional toil, logistical difficulties and inconsistencies across the range of ECEC settings (Page and Elfer, 2013; Goouch and Powell, 2012; Brooker, 2010). In their Baby Room research project, Goouch and Powell (2012), found that the least qualified staff worked with babies, were aged between 16 and 25, had very low self-worth and self-confidence, and were unable to express understandings of their practice. Page and Elfer's (2013) research acknowledges the emotional complexity of working with babies and small children. Page suggests that practitioners working with babies and young children should be 'highly qualified and emotionally resilient', (Page and Elfer, 2013, p.557) free and able to offer 'professional love' (2011). Page's concept of professional love is applied to a moral and ethical commitment to warm and responsive reciprocal relationships formed professionally with babies and young children, seen through a lens of 'intellectual caring' (Noddings, 2003; Goldstein, 1998). Accordingly, Page and Elfer (2013) call for more sophisticated management of attachment work in which the emotional aspect is acknowledged as professional behaviour. Such a view corresponds with the perspectives of Davis and Degotardi (2015), Taggart (2014; 2011) and Brooker (2010) that emotion work

through an ethic of care is integral to professionalism in ECEC. Ethical care is discussed in more detail in the next section.

The original work of Bowlby (1988; 1980; 1973; 1969) and Ainsworth (1969a; 1969b) concentrated on a dyadic relationship of mother and child. The KPA, informed by attachment theory, advocates a mirrored dyadic relationship with a practitioner (Elfer *et al.*, 2012) to provide continuity of care from home to setting. Considering the multiplicity of relationships intrinsic in contemporary family life requires thinking beyond the dyad of the mother/child and practitioner/child relationships to multi-relational aspects of development and learning, which is addressed in the next section.

### ***Attachment relationships beyond the dyad***

Contemporary attachment theory acknowledges the wider relationships beyond the mother/child dyad (Degotardi and Pearson, 2009; Graham, 2008; McHale, 2007). Rutter (1995) asserts that ‘attachment is not the whole of the relationship’ (p.566), and whilst he acknowledges that attachment security begins as a dyadic relationship, other relationships impact upon children’s lives and contribute to children’s learning and development in different ways. McHale (2007) confirms that to look beyond the dyad can reveal numerous socialisation influences in the dynamics of ‘coparenting’ (p. 374). These occur in the family’s ‘executive subsystem’ (*ibid.*) of shared parenting, which has group systems of accepted standards and rules, and a safe and secure home base regardless of whether they cohabit or live in multiple households. This view is not dissimilar to the concept of habitus where each group (or field) has its set of ‘dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

Degotardi and Pearson (2009) reconsider attachment theory in the light of the relationships formed by infants with both peers and early childhood teachers in Australia. Relationships develop with many people within the ECEC centre, and for different purposes. As a result, cumulative developmental gains are amassed through multi-relationships. Degotardi *et al.* (2013) explored these gains further, what they term the ‘provisions’ (p.4) that relationships afford, and how they were perceived by teachers and by parents. Findings indicated that both teachers and parents valued the many social, emotional and pedagogical functions

afforded through children's relationships with teachers, and the friendships that were formed through peer relationships.

A Canadian study (Quan-McGimpsey *et al.*, 2011) explored the concept of closeness in early education teachers' relationships with children. Three domains emerged from the research analysis: an intimacy/personal domain; the attachment/caregiving domain, and the professional/teacher domain. The intimacy/personal domain emerged as the largest theme, which included enjoyable intimate experiences such as physical contact (hugs, kisses and back rubs); teacher and child shared meanings, and the perceived mutual experience of positive emotions (feelings of warmth, happiness and comfort). Quan-McGimpsey *et al.* (2011) see the other two domains, the professional and attachment domains, as dominant frameworks for examining early relationships, and this corresponds with current ECEC practice in England, where the professional domain includes curriculum and policy, with the attachment domain linking with practice and policy through the KPA. In the study by Quan-McGimpsey *et al.* (2011), the largest intimacy/personal domain reveals an affective element and compares with Taggart's (2014) view of a compassionate paradigm for ECEC in England. Calls for an affective profession that includes such concepts as 'professional love' (Page, 2011) and 'compassionate pedagogy' (Taggart, 2014) that employ an ethic of care are becoming louder.

### ***Ethical care***

Goldstein (1998) maintains that caring for children is 'both an emotional and an intellectual act' (p.259). More recently, research by Reay (2015; 2004; 2000) that focuses on mothers' involvement in their children's education has suggested an extension of Bourdieu's (1986; 1895; 1977) conceptual framework to include the notion of emotional capital. This corresponds with contemporary discourses of professionalism in ECEC (Davis and Degotardi, 2015; Taggart, 2014; Brooker, 2010), that call for value to be placed on ethical care practices.

There are many references to the ethics of care in literature (Held, 2006). The origin of an ethic of care as a moral theory was first attributed to feminist thought in the 1960s. Feminism sought to place value on women's experiences of 'feeling as well as thinking, of

performing actions as well as receiving impressions, and of being aware of (our) connections with other persons as well as of (our) own sensations' (Held, 2006, p.23). Gilligan (1982) identifies that some women's experiences of care are articulated in a 'different voice' that conveyed strong moral thinking and feeling around decisions in their lives related to care. Noddings (2003) focuses on the aspect of caring and being cared for, acknowledging that 'caring is a relationship, that contains another' (p.58). She makes a distinction between the 'one-caring', being the person caring for another, and the 'cared-for' (p.4), being the child or person receiving the care. Noddings (2003) believes that the 'one-caring' feels *with* the one 'cared-for', and calls this 'engrossment' (p.30). She describes the nature of engrossment as a receptive engagement whereby '(I) receive the other into myself' (*ibid*). Similarity can be drawn here with Mein's concept of 'mind-mindedness' (2013, p.524) previously discussed. Noddings (2003) believes the feeling of engrossment is natural in mothers, where the caring relationship in turn is a learning experience for the infant who will one day, as Goldstein (1998) asserts, be the 'one-caring' (p.247). Barr (2011) agrees, maintaining that caregiver behaviour has a profound effect of regulating the behaviour of infants, helping them to cope with stressful and painful experiences, whilst simultaneously facilitating cognition, particularly memory.

Ruddick's work (1989) focuses on the natural thinking that the nurturing quality of mothering evokes, whether enacted by mother or father, believing that caring for a child demands 'preservative love, nurturance and training' (p.17). Ruddick (1989) states: 'The demand to preserve a child's life is quickly supplemented by the second demand, to nurture its emotional and intellectual growth' (p.19). I suggest that the early theories of ethical care situated in feminist discourses and presented here, therefore add strength and validity in terms of ethical thinking and feeling about care in contemporary world of family and the ECEC profession.

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) assert that practice with young children requires practitioners to apply an ethic of care as the 'care' factor in 'early childhood education and care' (p.90). If, as Pugh (2010b) suggests, policy has attempted to integrate education and care, then in contemporary times ethical care would be deemed professional practice. Indeed, Taggart (2014; 2011) suggests that practitioners often employ an ethic of care as confirmation of



professionalism. Similarly, Davis and Degotardi (2015) explore how 'care' is interpreted in Australian early years practice when policy is not explicit, and conclude that 'care should re-emerge as an integral part of professional practice and professional identity' (p.12), a view that corresponds with that of Taggart (2014). Brooker (2009) believes that an ethic of care requires adults to be led by the child, to 'watch and wait and respond to their preferences, rather than 'know what they need' ' (p.107). To respond to the child's preferences and needs would require a degree of mind-mindedness (Meins, 2013). Furthermore, I agree with Taggart and Elsey (2013) that Bowlby's (1969) original focus on the emotional characteristic of attachment relationships remains an important fundamental consideration, especially in the contribution to work with parents in ECEC. Mother practitioners may better understand these processes through their own mothering experiences, which they can apply not only in their practice with children, but also when supporting parents.

This section has drawn on the added dimension of the influence of science in ECEC discourse. When considered together with social theoretical perspectives, I argue that ECEC can be viewed as a psychosocial practice that embraces both the socio-cultural and the scientific, and this is never more evident than reflected in contemporary family life. These aspects require consideration when working with parents, particularly in the context of this study.

### **Mother practitioners drawing on experiences of mothering**

Literature specifically relating to whether, and how, mother practitioners draw on their personal experiences in their professional roles is limited. In general, parents and practitioners are represented as a binary discourse, where the two parties come together to form a working partnership. There are studies in which mothering is linked to teaching practice in general (Thomson and Kehily, 2011; Ailwood, 2008; Sikes, 1997), and brief references to mothers entering the ECEC workforce after having children to fit around family commitments (Wright, 2011; Osgood, 2004). Associations between the skills and qualities of mothering and ECEC practice are evident (Elfer *et al.*, 2012; Osgood, 2012; Siggers *et al.*, 1994), although again, these are not explored in depth or the prime focus. Elfer *et al.* (2012), offer an indication of acknowledgement of the similarities of both roles.

They refer to the ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ (p.76) perspectives of implementing the KPA, that draw on aspects of both personal experience of attachments at home and the key person. Elfer *et al.* (2012) explain how the late ECEC pioneer Elinor Goldschmeid, originator the concept of a key person, referred to ‘our internal textbooks’ (Elfer *et al.*, 2012, p.76), signifying the contribution of our own personal experiences that practitioners can make to their understanding and application of a KPA; evidence that ‘comes from the heart as well as the mind’ (*ibid.*). In addition, Elfer *et al.* (2012) assert that practitioners may draw on the wisdom of other significant people: ‘teachers, colleagues and mentors’ (p.76) to inform their practice.

Drawing on parent practitioners’ mothering experiences to support parents of babies and young children exists in literature and research studies but is largely hidden: it is acknowledged but not discussed in detail with reference to value. Elfer (2007) describes how nursery workers who are parents describe their primary task as one of building relationships similar to those within the family; whilst those who are not parents believe it to be providing opportunities for social and cognitive development not provided at home. Elfer’s (2007) research data illustrated the depth of drawing on the personal in a professional arena, for example one participant stated:

“...her mum was so upset at leaving her, she actually cried, she actually held on to me and cried. And I thought, God that’s awful. Actually made me cry. And being a mum I can take that into account, I can sit on her side of the fence. I really felt for her...”.

(Elfer, 2007, p.180).

Here I suggest is a reference to the empathy felt as one parent towards another, but not explicitly with reference to its worth in working with parents.

Similarly, in Page’s study (2014), research participant Martha, a nursery worker, told of being ‘distraught’ and ‘absolutely and completely traumatised’ (p.870) upon leaving her daughter at nursery for the first time. In Martha’s story of returning to work recounted by Page (2014), she found ‘... she could genuinely empathise with the parents, especially the

mothers who were faced with leaving their children for the first time to return to work' (p.180).

The work of Whalley *et al.* (2013) provides a model of working with parents in an area of disadvantage. She discusses how through persistence and respect for all parents, ECEC practitioners can build positive relationships in the most challenging circumstances. Pen Green was the first Early Excellence Centre and was included in the first wave of trailblazer Sure Start Centres in 1999 (Pen Green Centre, 2013). Its ethos was of developing a 'shared language' with parents (Whalley, 2007, p.13). Parents at Pen Green became research partners in their young children's learning and development. More recently, Whalley has initiated a 'tracer study' to determine the differences that Pen Green may have made to the then children's lives (Whalley *et al.*, 2012). Findings included strong memories of attachments to the key person for security and friendship. I suggest remembering such experiences will provide a sound foundation to take forward into their lives should they become parents themselves. Furthermore, by enabling the parents to engage with research and their children's learning, the staff at Pen Green will have embedded a culture of empathetic thinking and feeling within these parents which can be shared accordingly.

A recent study by Broomhead (2013) explored the benefits of instilling teacher empathy into pre-service teacher education, with the focus on working with children with special educational needs (SEN). Broomhead (2013) agrees that research has shown little attention to empathy, but found that although parents of children with SEN felt the only way teachers could empathise was to have children with SEN themselves, parents sharing stories with trainee teachers did develop understanding and an empathetic approach.

Cole (2005) explored issues of educational inclusion with six mothers of children with SEN who were also teachers of children with SEN. Her research arose from her own experiences as a mother and teacher. Again, whilst the link between personal and professional lives was not the prime research focus, Cole (2005) acknowledges that 'my experiences as both a teacher and a mother over the last 22 years or so have inevitably affected my views ... my values' (P.331). Cole's viewpoint indicates how one aspect of life experience can influence another, once again reflecting a Bourdieusian concept of habitus.

I suggest that these illustrations share a commonality that reveals a value in drawing from personal experiences in associated professional roles. The roles of mothering and the ECEC practitioner are closely aligned, and this study aims to determine how parent practitioners might draw on their personal experiences of mothering in their practice. Whilst the literature is limited, indirect examples where mother practitioners' personal experiences have informed work with parents do exist, though this may not have been the prime intention of authors and researchers.

Rogers (2003), a sociological feminist researcher, writes of researching the educational experiences of mothers of children with disabilities as the mother of a disabled child herself. Rogers (2003) explains how, with some of her research participants, but certainly not all, as an insider researcher she shared experiences resulting in blurred boundaries in the research process. Rogers is not an ECEC practitioner, and this is a methodological position, but her ability to empathise with other mothers is clear. Rogers' experience helps to envisage how mother practitioners may find it easier to 'blur boundaries' (2003, p.47), to 'work the hyphens', (Fine, 1994, p.70) and to 'listen to difference' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.126), and so build respectful reciprocal relationships with parents.

## **Summary**

This chapter has critically explored the literature relating to working with parents in ECEC in the context of this research study. I have set the scene with a historical summary of ECEC policy pertaining to working with parents, and shown how it has become intertwined with family policy. I have argued a preference for the term 'mothering' as opposed to the term 'parenting' which I have argued is ambiguous and disparaging in political rhetoric. I present a developing argument in the importance of recognising and acknowledging family difference in contemporary England when working with parents in ECEC, and discuss the associated unfair practice of othering particularly in terms of class through a social theory lens and the concepts of habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1985; 1977). At the same time, both mothering and the work of the ECEC practitioner are informed by science, in terms of influences from advances in neuroscience, attachment theory and applying an ethic of care, and this contributes to the suggestion of a psychosocial approach in practice

when working together with parents. I end the chapter by summarising the limited examples from literature where the value of mother practitioners is briefly discussed.

In Chapter Three I present and justify my methodological framework and the research methods used.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### Introduction

In this chapter I discuss and justify my methodological approach and the methods I chose to employ. In the Introduction, I presented my research questions, which I revisit at the start of this chapter to demonstrate how the methods I used were selected to answer the questions. I then address the 'purposeful selection' of research participants (Reybold *et al.*, 2012, p.700) for my study, which is necessary to the research inquiry criteria. My positionality as a researcher in the study is then substantiated before outlining the research design, which will convey my consideration of a psychosocial theoretical framework in which a narrative methodological approach will generate the desired stories of experience of mother practitioners.

I continue by discussing the methods used, being the 'techniques' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.19) or 'practical procedures' (Birks and Mills, 2011, p.4) I employed to generate and analyse data. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted following an initial set of questions through the medium of computer mediated communication (CMC), specifically electronic mail (e-mail). To produce the depth of detail desired, an on-going cycle of question and response was applied that generated participant stories of experiences of mothering and the impact that these experiences had upon their professional role with parents. This interview method is critically analysed and justified as well-suited to the study inquiry. I then discuss the application of a constructivist grounded theory process of 'constant comparison', in which data generation and analysis occurred simultaneously (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007b; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Finally, I address the ethical considerations and dilemmas throughout my study, in particular those associated with online methods of data generation.

## **The research questions**

The primary research question in this study asks:

*How might ECEC practitioners' personal experiences of mothering influence and inform their working practice with parents?*

Wellington (2015) asserts that 'how' (p.108) questions are exploratory and explanatory, but can be complex. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) similarly refer to research that is exploratory, investigative, and inquiring, and that does not set out to prove something. This study seeks to explore an issue of interest to me that I have experienced, personally and professionally, but one that I do not automatically assume is the same for all practitioners. Hence I follow the word 'How' with 'might': I might find that not all ECEC practitioners draw on their own mothering experiences when they support parents. The two secondary questions indicate how I will investigate the primary question further, and are:

1. *What factors in the experience of mothering their own children help ECEC practitioners to understand the role parents play in their young children's learning and development?*
2. *How do these factors influence the relationships that ECEC practitioners form with parents?*

Wellington (2015) refers to the idiom 'horses for courses' (p.108) with reference to matching suitable methods to research questions, and this chapter will demonstrate how I achieved this. Firstly, however, I discuss how I selected my research participants who, due to the specification of the research inquiry, needed to meet certain criteria.

## **'Purposeful selection' of participants**

Reybold *et al.* (2013) argue that the selection of research participants 'constitutes one of the most invisible and least critiqued methods in qualitative scholarship' (p.699). They apply the term 'purposeful selection' (Reybold *et al.*, 2013. p.699), referring to the selection process as a catalyst not only for discovering meaning but for making meaning. Cole and Knowles

(2001a) stress that decisions regarding selection of research participants 'are not hazardous; they are rooted in the principles and assumptions guiding the particular approach to researching' (p.65). With these views in mind, I therefore needed to be rigorous in the choice of my participants, as the research questions required them to be both practitioners and parents, and the interview method necessitated easy and reliable access to a computer.

It was my intention to recruit ECEC practitioners working in a range of roles and settings. This had potential to facilitate responses that may reflect how various settings work with parents, and in particular whether and how mother practitioners across the range draw upon their personal experiences to do this. I was seeking between six and eight participants, as I was anticipating the generation of large amounts of data. I did not wish to place myself in the situation where data management and analysis became unmanageable within the limitations of a small-scale qualitative study. Equally, I wanted to extract narratives of individual experience that reflected a quality of richness, not quantity, in which such richness may be weakened. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) assert, 'adequacy is dependent not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data and the nature of the aspect of life being investigated' (p.23). Ideally, I wanted to hear the views of practitioners unknown to me. I associate with Joinson (2005), who notes from his own research and that of others that anonymity increases the opportunity for disclosure through writing, and 'the need to express explicitly one's emotions and attitudes' (p.24). Maintaining a degree of anonymity whilst writing responses by e-mail therefore, he argues, is 'ideally suited to preserving privacy while simultaneously allowing openness' (p.26). At the same time, I was aware of the large number of accessible practitioners known to me after over twenty years in the profession. I did not wish to exclude these acquaintances from the opportunity to take part in my research on the grounds that they may presume my values and opinions, or conversely that I may inadvertently be influenced by my professional knowledge of them when interpreting or reporting the research data. Opting for a complete 'convenience sample' where the researcher selects participants who are easy to access (Wellington, 2015; Cohen *et al.*, 2011) however, was not my intention.

These factors were instrumental in my final decision to primarily focus on attracting a balance of participants that reflected a range of roles across the ECEC sector. After gaining



institutional ethical approval (*Appendix One, p.162*), which I discuss in more detail later with other ethical considerations, I proceeded to attract potential participants by sending an open invitation in three sweeps, which briefly described my research and established the carefully considered criteria of participant that directly related to my research questions and method of e-mail interviewing.

In order not to completely exclude those known to me, the invitation was e-mailed to professional contacts. They were asked to reply to me by e-mail me if they were interested, and/or pass on the information to others unknown to me, who they considered may have an interest in participating in my study. A second sweep was thus created by this 'snowballing' effect (Marshall and Rossmann, 2011, p.111). For a third sweep, I posted the invitation on an online ECEC forum for practitioners and local authorities, the Foundation Stage Forum established in 2003 (FSF, 2012).

In total I received twenty-one responses. All of the responses were from female practitioners, and although I was not excluding male practitioners, this reflected the fact that only 2% of ECEC practitioners are male (Bartlett, 2015). With ethical approval I was able to provide interested respondents with the Information Sheet giving more details about the research process and aims (*Appendix Two, p.163*). After receiving the information sheet all respondents remained interested, and eight participants were selected to represent a balance across the sector that reflected a range of roles and settings. Two of the eight participants were known to me and were selected because they were both sole representatives of the role and setting type in which they were employed. The remaining six were unknown to me and were geographically spread over England.

After informed consent was received by all eight participants, the research process began. I initially e-mailed a set of questions asking for factual information that included confidential information, for example names, addresses, and contact telephone numbers as a back-up. It also asked for details of their experience, their qualifications and their work with parents. A flexible last question asked for their own interpretation of the term 'mothering', giving examples from their experiences if they wished to offer them. This last question would set the interview process in motion with each participant individually, and upon receipt of the

completed initial set of questions, the interview process began. I used participants' own names, and at the end of the data gathering process they were designated pseudonyms by me or through their own choice, to protect confidentiality when reporting the research. *Table 3.1* shows the factual information that was not confidential but related to the research extracted from the initial set of questions. Qualifications and abbreviations are clarified in the List of Abbreviations and Glossary on p.viii.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Relationship status	Children (at time of research)	Professional roles at start of interview process and previous	Qualifications	Contact with parents
Nicole	34	Married	Son, 8 Son 6	<i>Current</i> - Team Leader for 3-5 room, Day Nursery <i>Past</i> – Nursery Practitioner across age range 1-5.	NVQ3; D32; D33	Direct – daily, sharing information, progress, developmental support
Chris	40	Married	Son, 8 Daughter, 5	<i>Current</i> - Children's Centre Teacher <i>Past</i> – Teacher for 17 years, in early years, reception, KS1, day care. Also worked as lecturer on child care courses	QTS, PGCE in infant specialism (3-8); EYP.	Direct – daily, in particular working in partnership, advice, parent workshops – EYFS, schemas, observation, transitions
Hannah	28	Lives with partner	Son, 21m	<i>Current</i> - Lead Professional (EYP) and joint Room Leader, 2-5 room, Day Nursery <i>Past</i> – Nursery Practitioner and After Schools Club Leader.	NNEB BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education. EYP	Direct – daily. Also responsible for parent workshops and Dad's Club.
Jessica	38	Married	Son, 7	<i>Current</i> - Pre-school assistant and Safeguarding Children Officer <i>Past</i> - Childminder	CACHE L3 Diploma in Pre-school Practice Safeguarding Children L2	Direct – daily, meet and greet, sharing KP information, one-to-one meetings on request, developmental advice
Sara	36	Married	Son, died at 2m, 8 years ago Son, 6 Daughter, 3	<i>Current</i> – Deputy Manager in Pre-school and Part-Time Reception Teacher <i>Past</i> – Teacher for 14 years in EYFS and KS1	BA, QTS in Early Years EYP	Direct – daily in both settings, meet and greet, informal chats with parents regarding progression
Mabel	44	Married	Daughter, 12	<i>Current</i> – Specialist Teacher and INCO in Special Support Centre within a First School –	BEd (Hons)	Extensive direct daily contact with parents due to nature of role and varying degrees of individual need.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Relationship status	Children (at time of research)	Professional roles at start of interview process and previous	Qualifications	Contact with parents
Mabel (continued)				teaches 4-8y altogether with speech and language needs. <i>Past</i> – Teacher for 20 years, originally in Y1/R, then moved to specialist teaching (behaviour, speech and language) mostly with early years.		Much emotional support for parents as well as children – sees this as vital and equal to support for their children.
Wendy	37	Married	Daughter, 13 Daughter, 12 Son, 11	<i>Current</i> – Advisor to Pre-school Management Committee and Lecturer on Part-time Early Years FDA. <i>Past</i> – pre-school Assistant, Deputy Pre-school Manager and EYP	BA (Hons) Theology and Religious Studies CACHE L3 Diploma in Pre-school Practice EYP Currently undertaking EY/KS1 PGCE.	Direct – daily in previous role to discuss progress, sometimes attended meetings with parents to support children's needs with other professionals. Places importance on partnership and anticipates working closely with parents in future teaching role.
Sophie	45	Married	Daughter, 17	Registered Childminder for 14 years	Foundation Degree in Integrated Children's and Young People's Services.	Extensive direct daily contact with parents, as well as e-mail and text messaging. Shares progress through photo albums, daily diary and information is reciprocal. Seeks feedback from parents via questionnaires, and organises social nights out with parents twice yearly.

Table 3.1 Factual information from research participants at start of research

Having established my research participants through purposeful selection, the interviews progressed. The next section will argue and establish my positionality as researcher in the study before outlining the research design.

### **Researcher positionality**

In recent years it has become recognised that the personal and professional life experiences of the researcher cannot be disembodied from the study in question (Wellington *et al.*, 2005; Sikes and Goodson, 2003). Additionally, Cole and Knowles (2001c) assert that research is approached as an 'extension of ourselves' (p.25), where our individuality and personal perspectives are upheld, and our own standpoints are further explored. It has been argued however, that a grounded theory method of analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) requires the researcher to begin as a 'neutral knower' (Lempert, 2007, p.245) who grounds new theoretical perspectives from the data only. Later schools of thought have repositioned grounded theory to 'understand such issues as those shaping the research process, the roles, social locations, perspectives of the researcher...' (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007a, p.50). I assert the authors here refer directly to the personal and professional knowledge and experiences of the researcher. Indeed, I argue that I apply a 'constructivist' grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006) in which I build, or 'construct' the emerging concept from the research data. Nevertheless, in addition, I maintain that through researcher reflection and reflexivity, my accumulated professional knowledge and personal experience of the psychosocial and political context in which the research is situated did influence the study throughout the research process, and in constructing the final concept arising from the research study.

### ***Researcher reflection and reflexivity***

Hibbert *et al.* (2010) define reflection as a process in which a person engages in an examination of their own 'ways of doing', where they become an observer of their own practice. Reflexivity however, is argued as a more complex skill which not only involves reflection on practice but also questions practice, instigating change as a result (*ibid.*). Jackson and Needham (2014) argue that reflexivity entails having an awareness of what, why and how both others *and* oneself behave, implying that consideration of how certain

behaviour affects practice is a worthwhile activity, and helps one to see things from another perspective. Greenaway (2010) suggests that thinking about initiating change through reflexivity is a 'quality assurance test' (p.1). Salmons (2015) claims that such change is more feasible in online interviews when familiarity with the research focus and participants grows during the process. Further still, she maintains that as the researcher becomes more engaged in the study, the difficulty to remain objective can be monitored and self-corrected through the application of reflexivity. In particular, as James and Busher (2009) identify, time and place for reflection and reflexivity is more readily available in interviews by e-mail than face-to-face interviews, for both researcher and respondent.

According to Plummer (2001), research involving people's lives demands reflexivity when confronting the impact upon the lives of both the researched and the researcher, which needs to be considered at the start, during and end of the entire process. However, and importantly, I did not want to reveal to my research participants aspects of my own self that could influence parts of their stories they wished to share with me, or provoke a power-related atmosphere in the research relationships I was to form with my participants. I wanted their stories to be purely their own experiences, feelings and views. Indeed, during the interview process I took particular care when probing deeper not to reveal my own perspective, experiences or opinions at any time. My on-going questioning always grew from my desire to facilitate added depth to participants' responses that were directly linked to my line of inquiry. Nevertheless, as argued by Greenaway (2010), researchers can and do approach their studies as quests to find out more about a particular topic of interest to them that arises from personal and/or professional knowledge and experience. I therefore connect with Chesney's view (2001) that 'the "me" in the research influenced the choice and focus of topic, the relationships in the field, and the content and analysis of the data and finally writing up the research' (pp.127-128). As a result, I contend that the methodological process I designed cannot work from a value-free base alone.

Wellington *et al.* (2005) identify the many aspects of researcher influence: values, biographies, social positions, perspectives and assumptions are all key catalysts in how research is framed and designed. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) highlight the related body of literature as another consideration of positionality. Corbin and Strauss (2008) agree that

‘researchers bring to the inquiry a considerable background in professional and disciplinary literature’ (p.35). These collective influential components identified by Wellington *et al.* (2005), Clough and Nutbrown (2012) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) were instrumental in my researcher deliberation during the entire research process.

Berger (2015), corresponding with Greenaway’s aforementioned assertion of reflexivity as a ‘quality assurance test’ (2010), refers to ‘the reflexivity of self-appraisal in research’ (p.220), whereby the researcher examines his/her own perspective, and is accountable for the effect of their positionality upon the research. However, Pezalla *et al.* (2012) refer to the ‘researcher-as-instrument’ (p.167) who is an active respondent in the process, creating a ‘conversational space’ (p.167) during interviews that also encompasses researcher self-disclosure. My argument against researcher self-disclosure to participants therefore requires further deliberation to justify my stance in this aspect of positionality, which I discuss next.

### ***Researcher self-disclosure in e-mail interviewing: insider or outsider?***

Drawing upon their individual interviewing techniques in team research, Pezalla *et al.* (2012) maintain that when the characteristics of the face-to-face interviewer are known or observed by interviewees, a variance in the effectiveness of extracting detailed narratives can result. As Drake (2010) confirms, insider researchers who choose a project as a result of years of personal and professional interest and experience in the subject will undoubtedly start with some pre-conceived assumptions and ideas. The ‘conversational space’ (Pezalla *et al.*, 2012, p.167) will be unique to each interviewer/interviewee relationship. Whether researchers benefit from sharing their experiences and knowledge with research participants is a contested issue (Berger, 2015; Pezalla *et al.*, 2012; Abel *et al.*, 2006). Pezalla *et al.* (2012) draw attention to the fact that researcher self-disclosure has the potential to create distance between themselves and respondents when power dynamics come into play. Conversely, Abel *et al.* (2006) note that some research suggests that interviewer self-disclosure enables ‘reciprocal talk’ (p.223).

The need for clarity and reason in my decision not to reveal aspects of personal knowledge and experience during the interview process becomes less contentious when the

‘conversational place’ (Pezalla *et al.*, 2012, p.167) is a cyberspace in which interviewer and interviewee are invisible. As a researcher I anticipated a degree of self-disclosure from my participants as my questioning probed deeper on issues relevant to the research inquiry. Joinson (2001) concludes from his research that self-disclosure was higher in computer-mediated communication than during face-to-face interviews. On my part, time and space in my ‘conversational place’ (Pezalla *et al.*, 2012, p.167) afforded by e-mail interviews would facilitate researcher reflection and reflexivity on participant responses, and so in this way I argue that I would still remain an ‘insider’ researcher. I therefore acknowledge the following influences that have shaped me as a researcher, and that contribute towards establishing my philosophical position within the study:

- My own changing personal life experiences as a daughter, wife, mother and grandmother: how I have frequently drawn upon my own mothering experiences to support family, friends, parents and practitioners, and continue to do so.
- The inner values and attitudes which have developed from my personal and professional lives, both separately and intertwined.
- My personal and professional relationships which have touched my life.
- My professional development, its reflective and reflexive learning journey.
- My continuing appreciation of related literature in the field.
- My theoretical sensitivity, being my theoretical insight into the area of research and my ability to generate concepts from the data that may be influenced by any of the above.

Throughout the research process I kept a detailed reflective research journal in which I recorded my thoughts, considerations and ponderings arising from the emerging data, comparing it with aspects of my own reservoir of personal and professional experience. Birks and Mills (2011) refer to these as ‘memos’ which have a significant function of making my researcher reflection visible when comparing and analysing data with aspects of my own knowledge and experience, or as Ortlipp (2008) describes, ‘creating transparency in the research process’ (p.696). Clarke (2005) describes memo writing in grounded theory analysis as ‘intellectual capital in the bank’ (p.85), in that it places a value of researcher



positionality in the research process. In this thesis therefore I make my philosophical position clearly visible.

## **Research design and methodological framework**

The research design is a clear vision of how I planned to proceed and generate narratives of practitioners' experiences of mothering, and their impact upon professional practice with parents in ECEC. I wanted to generate a progressive discourse through the medium of one-to-one e-mail interviews, and set in motion a continual back-and-forth relational pattern of participant responses to deeper researcher questioning. Wellington *et al.* (2005) highlight the difficulty in creating a rigid research design at the start, because problems arise throughout the entire research process. Such 'problems' became evident as the study progressed, and through reflection and reflexivity were overcome and amended in the methodological design. These were related to data analysis and the methodological approach. Although I had briefly considered and dismissed grounded theory at the research proposal stage as a strategy for analysis (Uwins, 2011) based upon my limited knowledge and understanding of the method at the time, once I began receiving responses from my participants I realised early that I was in fact simultaneously generating and analysing data. With each new line of inquiry, I responded by first summarising the key elements from the previous response received that related to my research questions, asking my participants to confirm my understanding when they sent the next response. This was followed by deeper probing of some issues, or a new line of inquiry. I created memos by noting down in my research journal the key issues raised with each participant response that related to my line of inquiry. I mapped out and compared similarities and differences, revisiting each response many times reflectively and reflexively, in order to consider the responses from both a professional perspective and my own personal values. In this way I was continually interacting with my emerging data, applying a grounded theory method where 'data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously and each informs and streamlines the other' (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007d, p.1). I did not have a clear pre-conception of the responses I would receive to my research questions, although I have acknowledged the influences arising from my own positionality.

Similarly, at the research proposal stage I applied the narrative genre of 'life history' research to the methodological approach. Over time however, during the interview process, I felt that the study sat uncomfortably within a life historical approach, in which participants' lives are studied in 'considerable depth' (Cole and Knowles, 2001d, p.13). I realised that I was not researching my participants' life histories, and that my study leaned more towards Gooch's framework of 'narratives of practice and experience' (2010, p.67) in which 'layers of narrative' involve stories of experience from many 'fields' (Bourdieu, 1985), for example in this study, personal, family culture, mothering, and professional policy and practice. The resulting adjustment is argued further in this chapter when I discuss the narrative approach.

Like Wellington *et al.* (2005) aforementioned, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe research design as 'flexible guidelines' (p.25). The notion of the flexibility of research design allows the researcher scope and licence to facilitate any eventualities within the planned framework, particularly as the design must be, and remain, 'fit for purpose' (Denscombe, 2007, p.3). *Figure 3.1* illustrates how I applied Birk and Mills' (2011) visual research design synthesis to convey the design of this thesis. The authors identify the components of a research design, where the starting point is a 'congruent philosophy' (p.4), which influences the methodological principles and the methods, being the 'practical procedures used to generate and analyse data' (*ibid.*). The interplay between the three components is clearly visible. Birks and Mills (2010) framework appears on the left hand side, with the corresponding features of this research design on the right hand side. Thus I began from a philosophical positionality, and applied an overarching narrative methodological approach to the research in which data was collected through in-depth e-mail interviews and analysed simultaneously using a constructivist grounded theory method.

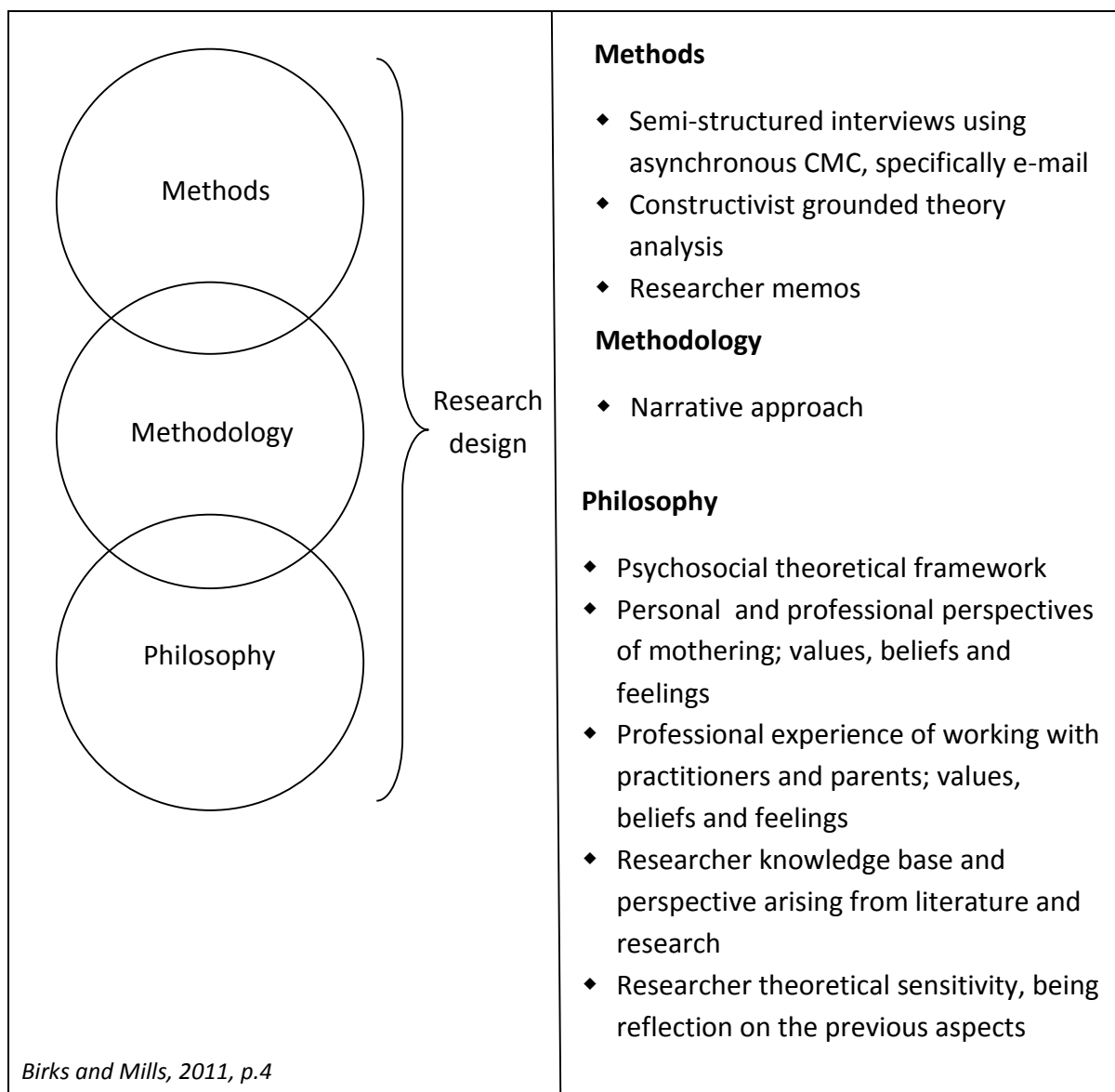


Figure 3.1: Research design using Birks and Mills (2011, p.4)

## A narrative research approach to investigate stories of experience

I have established that at the start of this study, my aim was to investigate stories of practitioners' experiences of mothering, and the extent to which they drew upon their experiences when supporting parents of the children they cared for and taught. In my research proposal I believed that it would be a life historical study, but on reflection, I chose to refer to my approach more generically as narrative stories of experience. This section will discuss the approach that I eventually took, explain this decision, and address some of the critics of narrative methodology.

Research literature reveals an array of terminology with multiple interpretations and definitions pertaining to the telling of stories. Stories told are a narrative construct (Riessman, 2008) that can be recounted in various ways, in written or oral form (Chase, 2005). Pelias (2004) argues: 'Whenever we engage in research, we are offering a first-person narrative. Even our most traditional work is someone's story' (p.7). Goodson *et al.* (2010) maintain that we 'live our lives 'in' and 'through' stories' (p. 1), and that telling stories about ourselves and our lives helps us to learn from our lives (p.2). Forty years ago Barthes (1975) maintained that narrative exists in many forms, being '... present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind' (p.237). In addition, in the context of this study, I associate with the view of Lawler (2002), who sees narratives in qualitative research as '*social products* (stress by author) produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations' (p.242) that are used to interpret the world.

Nevertheless, narrative research is not without its critics, who in general question trustworthiness and ethical dilemmas. Loh (2013) claims that to achieve a quality narrative study, matters such as 'trustworthiness, narrative truth, verisimilitude and utility need to be attended to (p.1). Verisimilitude in narrative inquiry is defined by Webster and Mertova (2007) as 'producing results that have appearance of truth or reality' (p.10). Pring (2003) argues that a primary principle directing research is 'pursuing and telling the truth' (p.60). Narrative truth therefore is problematic, because narrative stories of experience are highly subjective, and so narrative truth is not an 'absolute' (Squire *et al.*, 2014, p.110). I argue that humans experience life in a unique and personal way, influenced by many things, and as Squire *et al.* (2014) suggest, 'any two people observing the same phenomenon will offer different accounts of their experience' (p.109). Such a statement therefore can refer to both researcher and the researched. If narrative researchers are to heed Webster and Mertova's (2007) definition of verisimilitude as having the *appearance* of truth or *reality* (p.10) (my stress), then as Squire *et al.* (2014) ask, does absolute truth really matter? Consequently researchers must ensure that their participant stories 'ring true' and have 'believability' (Loh, 2013, p.9). In this study, I summarised every interview cycle response from my research participants and asked for confirmation that my summary was true to their accounts. To the best of my ability, this showed that I had understood and accepted their

stories as their lived experiences. Every effort was made not to allow my own positionality to influence or misinterpret them at this stage. Additionally, the constant comparison action of constructivist grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) described in more detail later in this chapter ensured that constant reference back to previous participant responses validated their stories as their true experiences. Interpretation became as Hendry (2007) suggests, a 'faith act' (p.492) where I acknowledged my participants as meaning makers, central to my own meaning making. Ethical dilemmas regarding narrative research are discussed further in the last section of this chapter.

In relation to narratives in educational research, Angus (1995) notes that 'fictional and non-fictional narratives provide a more accessible source of knowledge about teaching than scientific accounts' (p.2). Sikes and Piper (2010) share a similar opinion that 'stories have a place in initial and in-service teacher education where they can help to make people aware of an aspect of school life' (p.47). Goodson (2013) considers the stories of teachers' professional lives 30 or 40 years ago, when more autonomy allowed for flexibility and creativity in teaching. The stories teachers tell of their professional lives today would reflect the current historical political context, for example delivering a curriculum within a target-driven culture. Goodson (2013) maintains that this context is a vital element that shifts methodological focus from life stories to life histories, where 'the aim is to provide a story on individual action within a theory of context' (p.31). Goodson (2013) argues that life stories convey individual personal stories but become life histories when embedded in a particular historical construction. Similarly, Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) suggest that life history research goes beyond the personal and that meanings are interpreted within a broader historical context. The combined issues discussed here of historical context and extensive biographical data led me to reconsider whether my study actually constituted life historical research. My research participants were providing me with detailed personal stories of experiences of mothering and related matters of practice, which are part of life experience as a whole. In addition, although I have set the socio-political arena in Chapter Two as the particular research context, it was not the primary aim of the research to position and address related findings in a broader historical context, but one that reflects a contemporary socio-economic and political arena. Therefore I associate more with

Goodson's (2013) concept of 'small narratives' (p.12), and Goouch's framework of 'narratives of practice and experience' (2010, p.67).

Goodson (2013) argues that the art, culture and politics of contemporary times call for the beginning of the 'age of small narratives' (p.12) which reflects 'a move to highly individualized or special interest narratives' (*ibid.*) that are separated from the wider societal and political context. Small narratives, I suggest, seem more fitting in relation to this study with the focus on one particular aspect of ECEC practice, of a 'special interest' (Goodson, 2013, p.12). Likewise, Goouch's (2010) research which analysed the reflexive narratives of experience of two ECEC teachers is useful to consider in respect of this study. Goouch (2010) refers to the 'complex layers of narrative' (p.20) that are non-hierarchical, for example the narratives of the children, their teachers, their parents and also the wider layers of national and international policy. To include the narratives from layers of the broader contexts as data would, as Goouch (2010) asserts, require working with large amounts of data, so 'It might instead be safer to say that the author's voice attempts to faithfully reflect these voices. The first three layers, however, are non-negotiable' (Goouch, 2010, p.20). It is possible to see the connection here with Goodson's (2013) 'small narratives' (p.12) and the relationship of these concepts to the narratives of the mother practitioners in this study.

Bruner (1987) suggests that narrative is the only way to describe 'lived time' (p.12). He theorises further to consider what a life actually comprises in terms of time. Bruner places more emphasis upon the ways in which human beings recall their life experiences, as not influenced by the nature of 'internal states' (p.31) but as a 'recipe for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future' (*ibid.*). Likewise Goodson *et al.* (2010) maintain that the process of storying itself is a learning experience, not simply from the stories we tell, but more importantly the learning that takes place 'in' and 'through' the process of narration. Such stories are mostly unfinished, and part of 'ongoing construction and reconstruction' (Goodson, 2013, p.2). The very nature of responding to the research questions through recalling personal mothering experiences will engender a reflective discourse of recollection and storying these particular aspects of the participants' lives. The physical and mental

process of writing narrative recollection on a computer keyboard and in participants' personal time and space, will support these processes.

A study by Bowker and Tuffin (2004) found that asynchronous online interviewing, on a one-to-one basis, enhanced participants' ability to reflect more on personal beliefs, feelings and values. Likewise, Mann and Stewart (2000) extol the virtues of e-mail interviews as providing possibilities for 'probing detailed personal narratives' (p.150) for further developing issues, and for longer sequential interviews to allow deeper scrutiny of participants' experiences and perceptions. Therefore my intention to probe deeper into my research participants' stories through my choice of e-mail as a medium for narratives requires justification through more detailed examination of this method. I have adopted the term 'e-mail interview' as described by Gibson (2011) to refer to 'conducting interviews via e-mail' (p.4). Gibson explains her methods where on receipt of a response from a participant, she replied by first clarifying their response, followed by asking for more information on something they had written or asking a new question (Gibson, 2010). As Gibson's methods here are similar to my own I felt it appropriate to adopt the term 'e-mail interviewing' as opposed to other terminologies used.

### **Asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC): individual in-depth e-mail interviews**

The Internet can be described as originally being 'a network of computers that made possible the decentralized transmission of information' (AoIR, 2012, p.3). Mann and Stewart (2000) caution that the Internet is 'an evolving phenomenon' (p.7) and there is rapid changing jargon associated with its use. For this reason I position my chosen online methodology within the current era, acknowledging that technological advances to come may develop further as innovation becomes more sophisticated. Twenty-first century use of e-mail however is particularly fit for purpose to the aims of my research and the manner in which I planned to collect my data. I was explicit in my intention to receive personal and individual stories of mothering from my research participants. I chose one-to-one e-mail communication, sometimes referred to as asynchronous CMC or 'non-real time' (James and Busher, 2009, p.1) as a vehicle for the storying process. I did not wish to set up online

forums, virtual communities or 'cyberspaces' enabling online group discussion, sometimes alternatively referred to as synchronous CMC, or 'real-time' (James and Busher, 2009, p.1). In the same way that I did not intend my own experiences to influence my participants' stories in any way, neither did I want to create an arena for group discussion that could potentially impact on personal stories as told by the individual. I wanted to hear exclusive, pure, unadulterated stories of personal experience that could contain values, beliefs, feeling, emotion, opinion, reflection, reflexivity, messiness and justification. In short, I wanted to use e-mail as an interviewing tool as opposed to face-to-face in depth interviews that are consistent with the most popular method used in narrative research. I will therefore draw on some related comparisons between face-to-face and e-mail interviewing to justify my choice of medium; a method that I consider will facilitate what Cole and Knowles term as the 'guided conversations' of interviewing (2001b, p.72).

Mann and Stewart (2000) propose that e-mail could be the most commonly used service of the Internet. Using asynchronous methods considerably reduces the potential of risk to privacy and confidentiality associated with the use of the Internet, although there are ethical considerations related to online methods which are discussed in more detail later. Statistics indicate a rapid increase in household Internet access (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2014), reflecting technological advancement. In 1998 only 10% of United Kingdom households had any online facility (ONS, 2012) compared with recent statistics stating this figure to be 84% (ONS, 2014). From 2010-2015 Internet access has progressed to faster broadband connection and more recently to super-fast cable or fibre optic broadband technology (*ibid.*). Simultaneously, portable devices such as mobile 'smartphones', digital laptop computers, notepads and tablets use third and fourth generation (3G and 4G) mobile wireless signal networks or public Wifi hotspots, for accessing the Internet and e-mail. With e-mail now being the most common online activity in 2014 (ONS, 2014) it is reasonable to assume that 'e-mail goes with us everywhere now' (Freeman, 2009, p.4).

Using e-mail as an interview vehicle for communicating research participants' narratives therefore is a relatively new method. Tracing its short development thus far, Selwyn and Robson (1998) identified the use of e-mail as a research tool to be 'constrained by its, as yet, limited and biased population of users (in terms of age, income, gender and race)' (p.2).



The aforementioned statistics bear this out, showing only 10% of households in the UK with Internet access. Two years later, Mann and Stewart (2000) note that researchers adopting this method at the time were divided regarding the extent of its success. In another four years, Hardy (2004) called for a new research genre of 'digital life stories' (p.183). He argued that 'we have been living in the information age long enough for digital life stories to become a significant new form of narrative that reflects the realities of social life' (p.184); however, he expressed caution due to 'methodological and ethical issues' (p.197). McCoyd and Kerson (2006) suggested the advantages of using e-mail interviews far outweighed the disadvantages, and applauded its success for accessing detailed and sensitive data from 'difficult-to-reach populations' (p.404), both geographically and hard-to-reach stigmatised groups. Such groups, they maintain, find it easier to 'confide in machines that are viewed as non-judgemental rather than directly to another person' (p.391). Hunt and McHale (2007) believed e-mail interviews were still in their infancy (p.1421). In 2005 Hine identified 'considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions' (Hine, 2005, p.1). However by 2011, although Hine maintains her stance on the importance of ethical caution, she states: 'The Internet offers social researchers unrivalled access to the minutiae of daily life' (p.1). More pertinent to my research, Hine concludes:

Often these unobtrusive uses of Internet-derived data allow researchers to access something much closer to the experience of everyday life than we ever encounter in interview settings.

(Hine, 2011, p.3)

Gibson (2010) found that when given the choice, many research participants prefer to have interviews conducted by e-mail. In her study of older music fans' long-term involvement in music scenes (aged between 30 and 62), Gibson (2010) found that of her 70 research participants, only 15 opted for face-to-face interviews while the remainder chose to respond by e-mail. The results enabled Gibson to compare data, which indicated e-mail data to be 'particularly rich, and helpful for analysis' (p.2). The preference to present their data in this way suggests that research participants prefer the associated flexibility of time, personal space and reflective site of writing responses. Indeed, Burns (2010) found in his study that using e-mail rather than face-to-face interviews was on several occasions suggested by

participants themselves. Burns views e-mail interviews as a 'natural progression in what researchers are doing today with technologies available to them' (Burns, 2010, p.11).

This brief commentary of the chronological development of using e-mail interviews as a research method is drawn from literature, and serves a purpose. I acknowledge the earlier ethical concerns raised which will be addressed within the later discussion of ethical considerations in general. What it does indicate is the steady rise in use of the method for qualitative research, running parallel with technological advancement. It is clear from research that interviewing in this way extracts rich data that reveal complex details of the research inquiry subject, which may not be obtainable from a face-to-face interview. Most literature attempting to justify a case for e-mail interviews has focused on comparisons of advantages and disadvantages it has with face-to-face interviews (Gibson, 2010; James and Busher, 2009; Meho, 2006). Whilst this is useful to consider, I propose to approach this primarily by putting the emphasis on the value of e-mail interviewing in relation to my particular study and methodological reasoning. The key disadvantages are primarily related to ethical issues and are discussed later. Some advantages of communicating with my research participants through e-mail as a means of gathering narrative data include issues of work and time for busy participants; physical and geographical locale, and the cost and creation of ready-made texts eliminating the need to transcribe. I argue that the choice of method for my study is enriched by the unobtrusiveness of non-real time; has the potential for richer data through building online research relationships and provides a conducive arena for reflective and reflexive storytelling.

Asynchronous CMC with research participants can be described as an 'unobtrusive' method (Selwyn and Robson, 1998, p.1), due to not being in a 'real-time' situation with an interviewer. Research participants are in a personal space and time of their choosing. It is their decision alone how much information they wish to share. Six of my eight selected participants were unknown to me, and in geographical areas other than my own working region; this grants them a degree of semi-anonymity to disclose stories quite freely should they so choose, whereby, as James and Busher (2009) point out, 'participants may be willing to allow researchers to access not only the 'front stage' of their lives but also the backstage areas that are normally hidden from view' (p.24). It is argued in literature that e-mail

interviews restrict the information provided because responses are in a written form only (Hunt and McHale, 2007) and lack the presence of 'visual reference' (Bjerke, 2010, p.1717) and, as Walther (1996) suggests, have 'cues filtered out' (p.9). Non-verbal cues such as the use of interpersonal space, silences, body movements and postures, and variations in voice pitch and tone are perceived to be important in face-to-face interviews, in both researcher technique and respondent response (Fontana and Frey, 2005). However, Mason (2002) cautions that interpreting non-verbal cues requires the researcher to be mindful of making epistemological assumptions. As Mason (2002) implies, how a researcher perceives a sigh, or judges a research participant by their attire, for example, has the potential to influence our understanding and interpretation of the data. Seymour (2001) suggests, 'the 'nakedness' of the participant to the researcher's gaze is an issue of concern... our eyes are formidable tools of discrimination' (p.163). In agreement with Seymour's observation, I suggest that by summarising participant responses in each e-mail interview cycle prior to deeper questioning, with the additional request for confirmation of this from the participant, enables the elimination of the discriminatory assumptions that Seymour suggests in face-to-face interviews.

In the case of e-mail interviews, researcher and participant are not visible. The prime connection between the two is the mutual interest in the research topic. My research participants all responded voluntarily to an invitation to participate. They were given detailed information regarding my research topic, methods and line of inquiry. I argue that on the foundation of a mutual connection and interest at the start of the research process, a relationship with a common interest is born. My focus on mothering has the potential to stir deeply personal and possibly emotive memories. Prior knowledge of my intention to receive their stories by e-mail, and not face-to-face, therefore gave my participants a medium that appealed, otherwise, in my view, they may not have been interested to participate.

Several studies of sensitive subjects have been found to reap rich data through the choice of disclosure by e-mail that otherwise would not have emerged. Examples include Bjerke's study of recovering alcoholics (2010), Seymour's inquiry into the use of technology by people with disabilities (2001), and Scott's exploration of shyness (2004). Without exception, all researchers found that recounting their experiences via e-mail 'gave voice' to

participants and enabled relationships to develop. Walther (1996) pre-empted the future of technological advances in research methodology. He rebuked the notion that it was 'impersonal' by not communicating face-to-face, and claimed that online interaction went beyond 'interpersonal' to become what he termed hyperpersonal. By this, Walther (1996) meant that where participants had shared commonalities, with time to reflect upon their responses, present themselves and edit responses, often revealing deeper feelings and experiences than they might in a face-to-face interview, the relationship became hyperpersonal, over and above an interpersonal relationship. Walther (1996) claimed that participants adapt to the restrictions of a textual medium to more customary interpersonal levels. This could be interpreted today by the use of emoticons, or 'smileys' such as ☺ and ☹ (Gibson, 2011) or contemporary abbreviations such as LOL (laugh out loud) to indicate humour (Gibson, 2010). McCoyd and Kerson (2006) refer to participants who have used 'parentheticals' such as '(crying now)' and symbols such as (::) to indicate tears.

Through the literature I have presented a justified argument to use e-mail interviews that I anticipated would generate rich data from the narrative process of my research. Such an extended nature of developing e-mail communication over time and the unknown nature of my participant stories therefore required careful analysis. I now progress to argue how a constructivist grounded theory analytical approach was well-suited to meet the research requirements.

### **Constructivist grounded theory method for analysis**

Grounded theory was initially 'discovered' and further developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The basic proposition was that 'generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.3). Theory is generated directly from the data. Such a method, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued, was in contrast with 'theory generated by logical deduction from *a priori* assumptions' (p.3), or theory deduced through previous knowledge without experience. The system of coding data in grounded theory is meticulous and comprehensive; summarised very simply, data is initially rigorously coded line by line, with codes then grouped into concepts, from which eventually new theoretical meanings emerge. Additionally, of great significance, and a prime feature

of grounded theory is a simultaneous 'constant comparative method' of four stages described by the originators thus:

...(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory. Although this method of generating theory is a continuously growing process – each stage after a time is transformed into the next – earlier stages do remain in operation simultaneously throughout the analysis and each provides continuous development to its successive stage until the analysis is terminated.

(Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.105)

Harry *et al.* (2005) interpret Glaser and Strauss' definition as the researcher 'moving back and forth among the data' (p.5), gradually advancing from coding to conceptual categories and finally to the development of theory. On receipt of my first participant responses I began a system of coding by noting or 'mapping' commonalities and differences within responses. I realised I was comparing the data with each response as it continued, questioning it, theorising in my research journal through writing memos, and constantly asking questions of my data. I would often go back to earlier responses to do so while remaining within the research parameters and questions. The process I used is described in the next chapter where I discuss my analysis in more detail, but the development of my early analysis led me to believe that I was indeed, as Harry *et al.* (2005) express, 'moving back and forth among the data' (p.5) whilst simultaneously mapping it. Grounded theory therefore required exploring more deeply in view of this consciousness.

Since its first inception, grounded theory has evolved by those that Birks and Mills (2011) term first and second generation grounded theorists (pp.2-3). During this time Glaser and Strauss took separate pathways, with Glaser maintaining his original ethos and Strauss, with Corbin, maintaining but also further developing the original concepts. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recognise that 'each person experiences and gives meaning to events in light of his or her own biography or experiences, according to gender, time and place, cultural, political, religious, and professional background' (p.10). Grounded theory therefore, has moved into what Charmaz (2005) calls a more 'constructivist' re-vision (p.508) that accounts for researcher positionality playing a part in the 'construction' of new theoretical concepts.

However, Glaser (2002) argues: 'the most important property of conceptualisation for GT is that it is abstract of time, place and people' (p.25), elements that Clarke (2005) terms the 'context', or 'situation' of the research in question. Glaser's (2002) argument is that many researchers who profess to employ a grounded theory analysis are in fact simply carrying out qualitative data analysis (QDA). He reiterates:

In GT, the researcher must keep moving through the data to see the incident over and over and constantly be comparing and conceptualising. This is not easy. Researchers default to QDA.

(Glaser, 2002, p.33).

Conversely, Thomas and James (2006) contend 'if researchers do pick up and run with grounded theory, they risk losing the best of qualitative inquiry' (p.791). The authors identify the 'problematic notions' of 'theory', 'ground' and 'discovery' as contentious, claiming that a 'preoccupation with method' (p.791) can 'constrain and distort qualitative inquiry' (p.767). However in their conclusion Thomas and James (2006) refer to a 'new kind of constructivist grounded theory' (p.791) in which, they consider, voice may be heard. Similarly, Wasserman *et al.* (2009) criticise what they perceive as the 'hierarchical fashion' (p.360) of coding in grounded theory that in effect avoids linking concepts that give insight arising from their relationship. Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the seminal text refer to researcher 'theoretical sensitivity' (p.46) that comes into play only *after* scrutiny of the data and at the theory formulation stage. Theoretical sensitivity is described as when a researcher:

...thinks in theoretical terms about what he knows, and as he queries many different theories... it involves his personal and temperamental bent... (his) ability to have theoretical insight into his area of research, combined with an ability to make something of his insights.

(Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.46)

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) justify an 'epistemological rearrangement and re-engagement of grounded theory method' (p.50) towards a constructivist model, which embeds theoretical sensitivity intrinsically within the method *per se*. They assert:

This repositioning will allow us to understand such issues as those shaping the research process, the roles, social locations, perspectives of the researcher, the production of data, and the dialectical relationships between sensitising concepts and induction. Closer attention to these issues enables us to situate our grounded theories, see complexity, and to avoid the hegemonic reach of over-generalisation with its erasure of positionality, difference, time and location.

(Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, p.50)

Bryant and Charmaz' (2007) perspectives clearly resonate with my justification to draw on a constructivist grounded theory approach to analysis. Whilst maintaining the momentum of a traditional constant comparison during data collection, a constructivist approach gives licence to the consideration of those nuances of social life that have contributed towards the construction of my theoretical sensitivity. These will undoubtedly include my personal and professional perspectives and those arising from my research participant stories, as well as the body of policy, research and literature related to my research field. In order to code the data, and to address Wasserman *et al.*'s (2009) criticism that coding does not link the concepts and their relationships in the data, I adapted a simple system of Clarke's (2005) concept of situational analysis in grounded theory method to suit this study.

### ***Situational analysis***

Clarke's 'situational analysis' (2005) is designed to take account of the emphases of the complexities in social science research that she claims have developed as a result of postmodernist acknowledgement of the 'situatedness' of social science qualitative research. Clarke uses situational maps that 'open up' and interrogate the data in fresh ways (Clarke and Friese, 2007), and in which it is claimed 'all of these postmodern problematics can be addressed through situational analysis' (p.368). Clarke (2005) asserts:

Situational analyses seek to analyze a particular situation of interest through the specification, re-representation and subsequent examination of the most salient elements in that situation and their relations. Some of these elements have been traditionally discussed as 'context'

(p.29).

It is this issue of context which challenges grounded theory's traditionalist critics. Clarke's (2005) aforementioned call for the accountability of 'situatedness' drove her to devise a diagrammatic analytical tool which maps coded or partially coded data as a way of 'moving into and then around in the data' (p.84). This begins at the start of the data collection in the tradition of grounded theory. Situational analysis offer three cartographic approaches; situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps and positional maps (Clarke and Friese, 2007, p.366).

It seems pertinent therefore that my analysis through adapting Clarke's mapping concept to suit this study is fit for purpose. From a personal perspective, I have always found visual diagrammatic representation easier to digest than perhaps descriptive straight texts, and 'mapping' in several life situations comes naturally to me. To employ mapping as a data coding and analysis tool enabled relationships to be easily identified between elements that directly related to the subject of inquiry. I will demonstrate how I adapted and used situational maps as visual references in more detail in the next chapter.

### ***Memos***

Memos can be perceived as 'the narrated records of a theorist's analytical conversations with him/herself about the research data; as such they provide particular ways of knowing (Lempert, 2007, p.247). In the case of this research, the continual reflective and analytical notes that I kept throughout the process in my research journal constitute the writing of memos. Birks and Mills (2011) describe memos as the 'critical lubricant of a grounded theory 'machine' (p.40) and an indicator of quality. Wasserman *et al.* (2009) emphasise how memo writing 'allows the researcher to flesh out emergent concepts' (p.359) from the data. Memos also have the function of ensuring acknowledgement of researcher positionality. Lempert (2007) identifies the inclusion of this aspect to be a 'deviation' (p.247) from classical grounded theory rubric, as, similarly, is the use of literature. Lempert's argument for breaking with the tradition of engaging in the literature when theory is emerging rests in his view that 'in order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, I need to understand it' (2007, p.254). I often referred to my appraisal of literature in my memos, as I related issues to my data and my personal and professional experience, and so I am in full accord with Lempert's 'deviation' (p.247).



I have justified the rationale of my research design, with reference to the literature from research and its methodologies. In order to proceed with my intended inquiry it is necessary to address all ethical issues perceived as relevant at the start of the study. The University of Sheffield requires all studies involving human participants to be ethically reviewed and approved before data collection can commence, and the following final section will describe the process and issues that I addressed to gain ethical approval.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was sought at the start of the study. The University of Sheffield School of Education provides guidance on completion of the application for ethical approval, which I followed to ensure I considered all possible ethical issues, including confidentiality, the potential harm or distress to participants, issues of safety and protection, and how participants will be selected and give their informed consent.

In order to obtain informed consent I compiled a participant information sheet (*Appendix 2, p.163*), outlining the study and a consent form which was submitted with the application. Ethical approval was granted (*Appendix 1, p.162*), with three optional amendments. One recommendation related to a simple tick box error I had made on the form, and the other two were interrelated. Firstly it was recommended that I should address ethical issues specifically related to Internet inquiry, and secondly the review board felt that I should put safeguards into place to protect participants from distress, as this was not visible. I welcomed these recommendations to ensure that my research was ethically sound and amended both the Research Ethics Application Form and Participant Information Sheet to reflect these two amendments. I will now focus on the ethical challenges and dilemmas arising from both the use of the Internet for research purposes, and employing a narrative research approach.

### ***Ethical 'conundrums' arising from Internet research***

Earlier in this chapter (p.60) I included a detailed critical argument for using e-mail interviewing as a research method for gathering narrative data. Having justified the use of

the Internet for asynchronous CMC, I must, as a responsible ethical researcher, be explicit in my attention to the related ethical issues.

Ethical guidelines for researchers using the Internet are not transparent and cannot encompass the vast array of approaches and techniques applied today for using the Internet for research purposes. As James and Busher (2009) point out, online researchers have adapted 'conventional methods of on-site social science research' (p.56) but this has posed 'new contexts in which to resolve the ethical problem of research' (*ibid.*). The University of Sheffield provides an online 'Additional Guidance Note' that acknowledges: 'As Internet researchers encounter new venues, contexts, interactions etc., additional questions and responses will inevitably arise' (University of Sheffield, 2006, p.2). Similarly, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) has a separate online paper that acknowledges 'online research presents new ethical problems and recasts old ones in new guises' (Jones, 2011, p.1).

In my quest for rigorous guidance pertaining to Internet research, particularly in view of the optional amendments recommended in my ethical approval, I soon realised that this was an impossible task, and that research ethics overall will always present new predicaments. A view conformed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2012) states: 'Researchers, research participants and reviewers of research ethics will often encounter new or unfamiliar ethics questions and dilemmas' (p.33). Therefore it was imperative that I consciously considered the specific ethical challenges presented in the context of my study. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), an international and cross-disciplinary body, has been addressing Internet ethics through its Ethics Working Group since 2002 (AoIR, 2012, p.2). In the final guidelines it states:

Ethical conundrums are complex and rarely decided along binary lines. There is much grey area in ethical decision-making. More than one set of norms, values, principles and usual practices can be seen to legitimately apply to the issue(s) involved. It becomes difficult to make judgements as to which set(s) apply, especially when one set conflicts with another in some way. This forces the researcher to determine which is more relevant in a given context or at particular junctures during the course of the study. We emphasise that ethical concepts such as harm, vulnerability, respect for persons, and

beneficence are not just regulatory hurdles to be jumped through at the beginning stages of research, but concepts that ground ethical inquiry. As such, they should be assessed and considered throughout each stage of the research. Multiple judgements are possible, and ambiguity and uncertainty are part of the process.

(AoIR, 2012, p.5)

The statement from the AoIR above thus provided me with guidance and a degree of autonomy with which to address the ethical issues pertaining to my study and the use of the Internet, and on which I based my considerations at the start of my study. I acknowledge that these issues are not finite and ongoing ethical matters can arise throughout the research process. Considering the recommendations within the ethical approval process of my study together with interrelated matters pertaining to narrative research I move on to discuss in more detail the potential for harm or distress to participants; matters of confidentiality and anonymity; and the subjective 'I'.

### ***The potential for harm or distress to participants***

Although there are no perceived potential dangers of actual physical harm to my research participants, the process of revisiting, reliving and recounting experiences of mothering and workplace events has the possibility to cause psychological harm through distress. The nature of communicating through the medium of e-mail provides no visible indication of this. Asynchronous online communication in a virtual world is, to a degree, rendered anonymous, so closer attention should be paid to the explicitness of the research aims and methods when obtaining informed consent than would be with face-to face methods. Key to building trust and ensuring research participants' protection from harm when exploring sensitive issues, is the importance of negotiating an 'agreed set of norms' (James and Busher, 2009, p.69) for the research process. Acquiring informed consent therefore means that researchers 'must establish their *bona fide* status and the boundaries of the study more carefully than they might in a face-to-face situation' (Sanders, 2005, p.78).

As a result, in the participant information sheet (*Appendix 2, p.163*), I was overt and honest in my acknowledgement of the possibility that telling stories of mothering experiences could cause distress. It was made clear that participants had control over how they responded to

my lines of inquiry; the option not to respond to some questions; the level of detail they could give, and the option to withdraw from the research at any stage without explanation. The method of the e-mail interview process was continually re-explained and adhered to during the entire data gathering period. Participants were asked to inform me should any difficulties arise, and were given the procedures for making a complaint should they feel justified to do so. The topic of my research was explained simply and explicitly. Potential research participants meeting the criteria first indicated interest in the study prior to receiving the information sheet, then subsequently had the choice to give informed consent or not.

At each exchange during the research data collection process, participants were reminded of issues of confidentiality, and their choices to respond should questions be received as too sensitive. Even though these issues concerned me, by undertaking this, I was to the best of my ability ensuring the participants' continued understanding of their role in research process and their informed consent, their decisions as participants to share information, and their protection (Jones, 2011). Accordingly I consider that as a responsible and ethical researcher I established an agreed set of principles through informed consent (IoIR, 2012, BERA, 2011; James and Busher, 2009).

### ***Matters of confidentiality and anonymity***

There are two ethical areas of concern that I perceive appertaining to confidentiality and anonymity when using the Internet as a research tool. The first relates to the storage of data electronically, and the second is the wider issue of access to data by third parties.

Generating and storing research data on a computer applies to almost all contemporary research, whether data is collected by electronic means or by using face-to-face methods (James and Busher, 2009). It is transferred to the computer for reporting and increasingly for analysis. Therefore having regard for the Data Protection Act 1998 (HMSO, 1998) is not confined to Internet research as a method. Like Gibson (2010), I used a separate e-mail address and on receipt of responses the e-mail was immediately removed from my inbox and transferred to a separate folder. I transferred all data and related documents, including work in progress of the reporting on my thesis from my personal computer to a separate hard disc which I stored safely locked away. In this way I employed every effort to protect

my research data from external parties, thus complying with the Data Protection Act 1998 (HMSO, 1998).

It can be difficult to assure the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants in Internet research (Jones, 2011). However I would argue that the use of personal spaces and one-to-one e-mail communication as a vehicle to generate data does not pose such problems as might chat rooms, discussion boards, group conferencing and similar Internet 'venues' that involve group interaction. My research participants all used personal e-mail addresses to communicate their stories through, and at no time were identities of participants, data from others or personal information shared within the participant group. During the storying process I communicated with my participants using their real names, but as they had been informed, on reporting my research I used pseudonyms. I gave my participants the choice of choosing their own pseudonym, and only one chose to do this. Any reporting of family members was recorded as family member position (for example 'son') and not by name or pseudonym. E-mail addresses do not appear in reporting the data.

I have argued that I have considered all eventualities for breaches in confidentiality through the protective measures I put in place, and therefore have safeguarded my research participants' confidentiality and anonymity to the utmost extent possible.

### ***Authenticity and the subjective 'I'***

In both online methodologies and narrative research, ethical issues regarding authenticity and subjectivity arise. In particular, online research with unknown participants poses questions of whether the participants are who they say they are. Researchers need to protect the reliability and validity of their research data by verifying its trustworthiness (James and Busher, 2009). Recruiting six of my eight participants through a password protected early years forum ensured that I had participants who met my desired criteria and immediately had a shared interest. The initial set of questions asked my participants for factual personal details that included professional roles in which they worked with parents, thus providing a reference to refer back to at later times in the storying process. As James and Busher (2009) emphasise:

...it is the way in which participants' stories are constructed and the consistency with which they present themselves that provides the strongest reassurance to researchers of the trustworthiness of their accounts whether in online research or face-to-face.

(p.67)

I apply Lee's (2006) concepts of such consistencies as 'identity cues' that build 'pattern knowledge' (p.12) over time. In the later stages of the narrative to-and-fro process and when I was beginning to summarise my participants' experiences and views as a whole picture, I frequently referred back to earlier threads in the process to encourage these repetitive cues and gain further endorsement of the original story. In every case the response was consistent. In addition, it is true to say that over time I became very familiar with all my participants' styles of presentation as well as their stories and perspectives; in other words I got to know them very well. This includes the two participants known to me, because their stories developed my prior knowledge of them, instigating my reflection, reflexivity and knowledge in the same way as those unknown to me. The very process of interviewing over a period of time ensured the trustworthiness of participant data.

My research participants' stories of experience are subjective, told through the subjective 'I'. When reporting my research I too adopt the subjective 'I'. There are 'multiple 'I's' in narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Hones, 1998). Stories of events and experiences also disclose information about the narrator, which can reveal their perspective on a particular issue (Goodson *et al.*, 2010). The stories told by my research participants were rich in subjective perspective. Goodson *et al.* (2010) propose that reflection on life through narration is a learning process in itself, and that life, narrative and learning are interconnected. I argue that what constitutes knowledge in research studies through the attention paid to ethically justifying its reliability and trustworthiness can become blurred, as Gabb (2010) warns, 'I caution against the tendency to tidy up and sanitise the 'messiness' of everyday experience in order to produce academic knowledge' (p.462).

I address this ethical dilemma through my primary research question: *How might ECEC practitioners' personal experiences of mothering influence and inform their working practice with parents?* I believe I would do my research participants a moral injustice if I interpreted

their stories of experience and their perspectives in response to my research questions in any other manner than through the subjective 'I'. With every line of inquiry I was meticulous in summarising the previous response and asking my participants to confirm that I had understood what their stories told me. In turn, in relating and recounting my perspective, it was in the first person. In this way I justify the ethical issues regarding authenticity and subjectivity.

### ***Ethical dilemmas evolving during the research process***

Ethical considerations are not simply addressed at the start of a research project, as ethical dilemmas can occur throughout research process (Wellington, 2015). This final section discusses the dilemmas and concerns that arose for me during the research process, and how I confronted these challenges.

The first dilemma that arose was the early withdrawal from the research of participant Sara. This is discussed in the following chapter (pp 90-91) but at the time it raised some ethical concerns. Sara had divulged in her initial set of questions that she had three children, but had lost her first child at two months. She had referred to this again when giving me her perception of the term 'mothering'. Sara did not respond to the second cycle of questioning, so I followed my planned procedure by re-sending it again after two weeks, to which she sent the reply: "Oh blimey I totally forgot! I'll get on to it asap. Sorry, Sara". Sara did send a brief response after another four weeks, but after that time I received no more contact from her. I followed my agreed procedures and e-mailed her to let her know that I had understood her silence to mean her decision to withdraw. As expressed in the participant information sheet (*Appendix 2, p163*) she was able to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Although I was concerned that I did not know the real reason for Sara's withdrawal, as an ethical researcher I had to fulfil my role as explained to the participants in the Information Sheet. When it came to the time to write up my report, I e-mailed Sara again to ask her if I could refer to the responses she had already given, which she affirmed immediately and wished me luck with my study. I did indeed ponder as to her reason for withdrawal, whether she had simply forgotten to respond again or whether it was too distressing for her, given her personal circumstances. Thinking about the possible distress, and given the related optional recommendation made during the ethical review (*Appendix*

1, p.162) that I discussed earlier, it did cause me concern. However, on reflection I felt that I had protected my participants sufficiently in the Information Sheet by raising awareness of possible distress caused when recalling some experiences. To this end, I felt that by addressing it with participants it was then their own choice whether to consent to taking part or not.

The second dilemma arose from personal circumstances. When my mother died towards the end of my data collection, my own circumstances became poignantly aligned to my research line of inquiry. Bereavement of a parent causes one to reflect on one's own childhood experiences, and for a few weeks it became difficult for me to continue with my research. This corresponded with school summer holidays when some participants were away anyway; however I followed procedures laid out in the participant information sheet (*Appendix 2, p.163*) and let the participants know that there may be a delay in my planned procedures for responding to their e-mails due to a family bereavement. I had built up good relationships with my participants by this time, and although I received immediate sympathetic responses from them, it was a crucial time in my research and I was concerned I might lose the momentum of the interview process or even worse lose my participants. As it happened, neither of these things materialised, but at the time the ethical dilemmas I felt as a researcher having to take time out from the interview process were something I had not considered and learned from.

A final ethical predicament arose out of receiving a response from a participant that caused me to question the moral and ethical reasoning behind the information she had shared with me. I discuss research participant Wendy's particular response in detail in Chapter Five, and include the reflections from my research journal on the dilemma it posed me. By summarising my understanding of her response and asking for her confirmation of my understanding I then proceeded to reflect upon the issue in detail and compare it with other participants' responses. In Chapter Five I include my reflective journal entry in the context of the matter raised, to indicate how I came to the conclusion that I did. This issue raised my awareness of the possibility of the researcher becoming party to revelations of unethical or immoral practice, and the importance of addressing such dilemmas with participants from the onset.



## **Summary**

In this chapter I have provided an overview of my research methodological design and justified through literature my choice of methods to respond to my research questions. I first explained how I established my research questions. I described how I recruited and selected my research participants before I addressed my researcher positionality. I followed by establishing a clear synthesis in my methodological framework and justified the methods used in detail. Narratives of experience were generated using e-mail interviewing as a vehicle for researcher/participant communication, and a detailed argument for this method has been achieved. A rationale is given for analysing data through the use of applying a constructivist grounded theory method of data analysis. I end this chapter by addressing the considered ethical issues, in particular those in light of the optional recommendations made in the letter of ethical approval. Chapter Four describes in detail how the data was analysed by employing a constructivist grounded theory method to analyse the findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Introduction

Stern (2007) writes of 'growing' (p.115) a grounded theory, which is a fitting perception to introduce this chapter that describes the analytical method I applied to my research. Through examples from the data I will illustrate how I 'grew' my theory (Stern, 2007), 'constructing' it (Charmaz, 2006) by continually analysing and comparing the e-mail interview responses from my research participants. In addition, aspects arising from my positionality discussed in Chapter Three, which comprise my professional and personal knowledge and experiences, also contributed towards the developing concept. My research journal reflections arising from reading participants' e-mail interview responses therefore, can be compared with Stern's (2007) assertion that '... everything I see, hear, smell and feel about the target' (p.115) are data. In this way my thinking, feelings, knowledge and experiences all played a part in the analysis.

I justified the research design and methodological framework in Chapter Three, where I substantiated the study as an exploration of ECEC practitioners' narratives which were based on their experience of mothering, and the extent to which these experiences are reflected in their professional practice with parents. I was interested in the range of experiences that ECEC mother practitioners had gained through mothering their own children and the possibility of these experiences influencing their working practice. My curiosity is supported in the words of Goodson and Sikes (2001) when they assert: 'There are likely to be many influences, experiences and relationships within any teacher's life which have led to their developing a particular philosophy of education' (p.21). By interviewing mother practitioners I anticipated extracting data that would provide answers to my research questions.

This chapter explains in more detail how I gathered the participants' narratives and applied a grounded theory method of data analysis. I first demystify constructivist grounded theory terminology by offering a more straightforward interpretation of the method that I employed. By preventing the overuse of grounded theory terminology in the analytical

description that follows in this chapter, I therefore acknowledge my understanding of grounded theory as a method for analysis whilst providing clarity of the process I employed. Throughout the chapter I use examples from e-mail interviews to illustrate how the analytical process arrived at the central concept of the value of the empathetic mother practitioner. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' anonymity, and transcriptions are verbatim as written in e-mails.

### **Demystifying constructivist grounded theory as an analytical instrument**

Terminology particular to grounded theory analysis can render the method complex to grasp, which in turn has led to criticism of many researchers claiming to employ the method. O'Reilly *et al.* (2012) illustrate this point by maintaining 'in practice many research studies cite the use of grounded theory but merely apply certain à la carte aspects or jargon of the method while not actually incorporating the fundamental principles of the methodology' (p.247). Likewise, Bryant and Charmaz (2007d) label grounded theory as a much 'contested concept' (p3) that offers a 'variety of descriptions' (p.4), which can add even more confusion for the researcher who wants to convey a sound generation of a central concept. It is significant to appreciate however, and in particular with reference to this study, that grounded theory is essentially the development of a central concept arising from the data; or as Glaser (2007) asserts '... purely and simply the conceptual extension of the general implications of a core category' (p.111). In this thesis, as Glaser (2007) maintains, a central theme (core category), of 'exercising empathy' emerged as the key finding that ran like a thread through every aspect of the data; it was ultimately the life-blood of the research findings. As a result, the resulting concept (the grounded theory) of the value of the empathetic mother practitioner was established.

Stern (2007) emphasises the importance of the research story making sense to the reader, and one that O'Reilly *et al.* (2012) agree follows the essential qualities of grounded theory. Key texts pertaining to grounded theory include a glossary of terms that refer to the essential qualities of the method. For the purpose of clarifying the analysis of this study, I have created *Table 4.1* which identifies the key terminology of the principles, provides definitions using citations from seminal and key literature, and finally offers my

interpretation applied in this study. By conveying my application of the fundamental concepts of grounded theory in this way I substantiate a grounded theory analysis. I avoid distraction through overuse of jargonistic terminology by replacing key terminology with my own words when describing exactly how I analysed the data, thus ensuring, as Stern (2007) demands, that the research story makes sense.

<b>Grounded Theory Terminology</b>	<b>Cited definition/reference (seminal and later texts)</b>	<b>My Commentary/Interpretation</b>
Theory	That (concept) which 'is more generally applicable and has greater explanatory and predictive power' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.24)  '... an explanatory scheme comprising a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns of connectivity' (Birks and Mills, 2001, p.113)	A central concept that encompasses all themes running through the e-mail interviews that is directly related to the research inquiry.
Grounded	'The discovery of theory from data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.1)  '... building theory from data' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.1)	Concept arising directly from the data and not pre-conceived assumptions, knowledge or experience.
Constructivist grounded theory	'We are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices... I argue for building on the pragmatist underpinnings in grounded theory and advancing interpretive analyses that acknowledge those constructions (Charmaz, 2006, p.10)	Building the theory from research participant e-mail interviews, and influenced by researcher knowledge and experience and the socio-political context in which the research is situated.
Constant comparative analysis	...comparing incidents applicable to each category ... integrating categories and their properties ... delimiting the theory ... writing the theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.105)  '... comparing data with data, data with code, code with code, code with category,, and category with category' (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007d, p.25)	Constantly comparing e-mail interviews between participants, and with researcher experience, knowledge and understanding.
Coding	The process of placing 'each incident in the data into as many categories of analysis as possible, as categories emerge or as data emerge that fit an existing category' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.105). 'Coding need consist only of noting categories on margins but can be done more elaborately...It should keep track of the comparison group in which the incident occurs' (p.106).  'The process of defining what the data are about' (Charmaz, 2006, p.186).	Labelling themes that emerge from the e-mail interviews with participants. Themes were 'mapped' by writing them on sheets of paper providing a visual representation of many themes. In this way it was easier to link and combine themes by simply drawing a connecting line or arrow between them.
Coding with gerunds	'Verbs used as nouns that always finish with 'ing' (Birks and Mills, 2011, p.174)  'We gain a strong sense of action and sequence with gerunds. The nouns turn these actions into topics' (Charmaz, 2006, p.49).	Using gerunds where possible to label emerging themes: instead of using the noun, for example an emerging theme of 'being a role model', becomes 'role-modelling' by applying a gerund.

<b>Grounded Theory Terminology</b>	<b>Cited definition/reference (seminal and later texts)</b>	<b>My Commentary/Interpretation</b>
Theoretical sampling	<p>‘... the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.45)</p> <p>‘Data gathering based on evolving concepts. The idea is to look for situations that would bring out the varying properties and dimensions of a concept’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2009, p.117)</p>	A testing theories process used in this study whereby themes emerging from participant e-mail interview responses were compared and from which decisions for further lines of inquiry were made.
Theoretical sensitivity	<p>The ability to ‘...conceptualise and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data... it involves his (the sociologist’s) personal and temperamental bent ... his ability to have theoretical insight into his area of research ... and an ability to make something of his insights’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.46)</p> <p>‘The ability to generate concepts from data and relate them according to normal models of theory in general’ (Holton, 2007, p.274)</p>	My ability as a researcher to identify the emerging key concept(s) running through the interview responses; in this study commonalities in the data regarding the exercising of empathy were clearly evident.
Theoretical saturation	<p>The stage when ‘...what has been missed will probably have little modifying effect on the theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.112)</p> <p>‘... the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory’ (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007c, p.611)</p>	The point reached when data no longer contributes fresh and relevant information towards informing the research inquiry.
Core category	<p>‘...represents a phenomenon, the main theme of the research’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.266)</p> <p>‘ ... it is central ... it relates meaningfully and easily with other categories’ (Holton, 2007, p.280)</p>	The central theme of ‘exercising empathy’ arising from the e-mail interview responses that was related to all other themes and that pulls it all together.
Theoretical integration	<p>‘The process of linking categories around a core category and refining and trimming the resulting theoretical construction’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.263)</p> <p>‘...an integrated set of hypotheses (that include) the researcher’s memos, once sorted and fully integrate’ (Holton, 2007, p.283-284)</p>	The synthesis of the final themes and central theme identified in the data that leads to the key concept (grounded theory) of the research.

Grounded Theory Terminology	Cited definition/reference (seminal and later texts)	My Commentary/Interpretation
Memo writing	<p>‘Memo writing on the field note provides an immediate illustration for an idea’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.108).</p> <p>‘Memos, conceived as adaptable narrative tools for developing ideas and elaborating the social worlds of research sites, form the infrastructure of a Grounded Theory research process. They are narrated records of a theorist’s analytical conversations with him/herself about the research data: as such, they provide particular ways of knowing’ (Lempert, 2007, p.247)</p>	Reflective and reflexive notes and thoughts on the entire research subject and process, in this study entries made in my research journal that result from my positionality.
Context	<p>‘The important so-called contextual elements are actually <i>inside the situation itself</i>. They are <i>constitutive</i> of it’ (Clarke, 2005, p.30)</p> <p>‘Structural conditions that shape the nature of situations, circumstances, or problems to which individuals respond by means of action/interaction/emotions. Contextual conditions range from the most macro to the micro’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.87)</p>	Any constituent of the research setting or arena that is relevant to the research inquiry and therefore included in analysis. In this study, context encompasses the socio-political and socio-economic worlds of early childhood education and care, as well as that of children and families, discussed in Chapter Two, the Literature Review.
Situational analysis	<p>‘... allows researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment – to analyse complex situations of inquiry broadly conceived (Clarke, 2005, p.xxii)</p> <p>‘Actively analysing data for contextual conditions of the substantive area of enquiry is premised on the philosophical and methodological position assumed by the researcher (Birks and Mills, 2011, p.107)</p>	A form of mapping analyses related to grounded theory conceived by Clarke (2005) that includes all of the elements of the research context in the analysis. I drew upon Clarke’s ( <i>ibid</i> ) concept to map emerging themes and connections in my own style (see description in ‘Coding’, and demonstrated later in this chapter).
Situational maps	<p>‘... supplemental approaches to traditional grounded theory that center on the framing of action ... on elucidating the key elements, materialities, discourses, structures, and conditions that characterise the situation of inquiry empirically’ (Clarke, 2005, p.xxii)</p> <p>‘Strategies for articulating the elements in the situation and examining relations among them’ (Birks and Mills, 2005, p.107).</p>	My diagrammatic interpretations/mappings of the elements and themes emerging from the research data. I apply Clarke’s terminologies of ‘messy mapping’ and ‘relational mapping’ (2005), demonstrating these using interview data later in this chapter.

Table 4.1 Demystifying grounded theory terminology

## Collecting and developing research participants' narratives of experience

In Chapter Three I discussed the procedure of 'purposeful selection' (Reybold *et al.*, 2013, p.699) of my research participants, and explained how the research would proceed. On receipt of the initial completed set of questions, I sent an e-mail to all participants giving more detail of the actual process and reiterating the ethical matters that I would respect. I explained that if I did not receive a response within two weeks I would re-send it. If another two weeks passed with no response I would send a different line of inquiry, and if the silence continued after that I would e-mail to confirm that I understood the silence to indicate that the participant was withdrawing, as indeed they had been informed was their right to as part of the ethical review process, without explanation. I explained to the participants they could write as little or as much as they wanted to and in their own preferred format and style.

The initial question asked of all participants that set the interview process in motion with each of them individually, asked:

### Question 1

'What is your perception of the term 'mothering'? Perhaps you can give examples from your experience as a parent...'

Research participant Chris' response to this question was:

**Chris:** My perception of mothering is one of nurturing, protecting and enabling your child to become independent and confident in expressing themselves and ideas. I see my role and my husbands to act as a positive role model and extend the boundaries of experiences for our children. I try to encourage the 'have a go' approach, and that feeling confident in their own endeavours will lead to inner strength of character. I think my mothering style has come from my background and core values - family is vitally important in supporting an individual; love, affection, providing for thier needs, communication and respecting others. (I lost my dad at 6 years old but was surrounded by warmth and love.)

My children have quite different personalities. (Son) needs to know about situations and things in advance (having suffered bad separation anxiety when he started day care at 1 yr old). I used to make up scenarios and stories to help (son) with situations I thought he



might get worried about and we used to discuss what the person in the story might say or do to make the situation better/understand their feelings. (Daughter) is more willful and emotional but copes much better with change and responds to things 'just happening'. I therefore adapt my style of approach and reaction to their personalities. I feel I am quite 'in tune' with my children's needs and try and take time out to listen, play, laugh and cuddle them. There are boundaries and routines at home but I'm quite a relaxed person and so what most people would possibly find unacceptable doesn't really bother me - mess, paint up the walls, handstands on the sofa etc, as long as they are respectful to each other and to us as parents. We negotiate rules and find acceptable ways to try and help each other (this tends to work better around xmas time!!!). Listening and taking an interest in your children I feel is very important. The one thing I have not got the balance of yet as a mother (and a working mother) is the guilt and finding 'me' time to recharge my batteries. I think being a mother can be an over whelming responsibility at times and emotionally draining. However, I would not change it for the world and try to make sure that I am always there to support them in whatever they do.

After receiving Chris' e-mail I was keen to examine her response more deeply in the context of my research questions. I wanted to know how she herself had felt when her son started at nursery after she had revealed that he suffered from separation anxiety. This subject had potential for me to explore the extent to which Chris may have shared her experiences with parents. I posed the second question:

Question 2:

You describe how your children's different personality traits mean that you adapt your approach towards each of them accordingly. In particular, you write about how you 'prepare' (son) for future uncertainties through using stories. Could you please tell me a little more about (son) when he first started in day care? If you feel able to, perhaps you can tell me a little bit about the effect that this had on you too?

Chris responded:

Hi Janet,

I hope my account of (son) starting day care is useful. Here goes:

(Son) started day care when he was approx 1 year old. As my first born, I spent an incredible amount of time with (son). I would lie in bed at night and plan things that we could do each day. I had a small group of friends who met up often. During these times I often felt a little 'out of it', preferring to be with (son) and playing with him. I was probably quite intense as a mother to begin with. I had to return to work when (son) was 1 yr old. In all honesty, I was dreading going back (the school I worked at was particularly challenging)

I was worried that I would have no energy left for my son when I came home and I resented spending all my time planning, marking etc. I think this might of been a factor in how (son) felt going into nursery. I also think that the age he went in was a bad time because he was so self aware and conscious. He was also walking at 9 and a half months and in a room with babies who were immobile. I think he was frustrated and felt left to get on with it as the staff had smaller children who needed more physical attention. It was a good nursery, I knew the owner as I had lectured with her and many of the staff. I had also worked there some years previously, but it broke my heart to be away from him. On reflection, I think that my anxiety possibly transferred onto (son). However, he had a strong sense of personality and purpose. I remember being at a baby massage group with him, crying and crying that I had to return to work and leave him. I think I was very upset at the thought of leaving him and returning to a job that made me unhappy.

(Son) only attended nursery 2 days a week. The first week was ok. I remember his key worker saying to me 'You can tell (son) is used to being around an adult'. I didn't know which way to really take this. Was he clingy, or needing alot of reassurance? I did have a chat with her and discussed what we did at home and his personality. Over the year he had times when he was truly upset, the owner phoning me to say he couldn't be reassured all day. I often went in for a chat to listen and suggest strategies. I always tried to speak positively about nursery and sometimes be quite firm and factual if he put up alot of resistance to going. There were times when he was happier to go. I made friends with one of the mum's at the nursery and we met up often so that the children could get to know each other. I thought this would help (son), if he bonded with someone, he might feel a little more secure.

I am quite an out-going person. I thought that if (son) saw me being like this, he would feel confident to talk to others or let others know his needs. To a degree he did, but again, his personality is different to mine. My husband thought I was probably too over sensitive towards him and his needs and to a degree I probably was. It's just that protective instinct. When they are very small and you cannot be there as a parent, you want to ensure that your child's every needs are met. I now think that nursery can help develop a child's resilience and independence. I would say that (son) still get's a bit anxious about situations where he needs to attend on his own but he is much better. He requires a little reassurance (ie that I am around if he wants to come home, but try it first).

It's just a tough call to work out whether it's a nature/nurture thing. My feeling is it's a bit of both. I do encourage him to 'just try' and then make his mind up. Unfortunatley, as a 1yr old he had not choice but to go into childcare. I think the guilt of that has always stayed with me.

Regards  
Chris

The next box shows how I replied to Chris again, by first summarising some of the relevant points in Chris' response before probing deeper, again in line with my research questions:

Hi Chris

Thank you very much for your response to my questioning and for sharing such personal information. First of all I am going to summarise some of the points I have read in your response in order to check my comprehension of what you are saying, and then take one or two of these issues forward in a new or deeper line of inquiry. In my summary, if you feel I have misinterpreted your stories please say so and explain in your words again what you wanted to convey.

Summary of some of your points:

1. You really enjoyed being at home with (son) during his first year. You provided a rich home learning environment through play (*'I would lie in bed at night and plan things that we would do each day'*).
2. He built a strong attachment to you, and you to him, and you feel that (son) may have sensed your resentment, inner feelings and emotions regarding going back to work (*'... it broke my heart to be away from him'*, and you remember *'crying at a baby massage class'*).
3. You respected the nursery, it was good, you knew them well and had worked there. However you ponder on this when talking about his needs which you knew about as his mother – he was walking, very self-aware and conscious (*'I think he was frustrated and felt left to get on with it as the staff had smaller children who needed more physical attention'*). They did care about (son) and let you know when on occasions he was inconsolable. You worked hard in partnership with the nursery and (son's) KP to meet his needs (*I often went in for a chat to listen and suggest strategies'* and *"When they are very small and you cannot be there as a parent, you want to ensure that your child's every needs are met"*).
4. You believe today that nursery can help children's growing resilience and independence.

Further questions:

- What was the experience like when you were separated from (Daughter) when you went back to work? (I'm presuming you did). If it was different, do you feel that it is simply down to the fact that they have different personalities, or maybe another reason why...
- In your subsequent work with parents, are you reminded of how you felt sometimes when you see parents going through similar experiences... perhaps you can expand on this a little or you may have some stories to illustrate your responses?

Again, in your own time Chris, and everything else I have said before still applies (confidentiality, your choice to respond).

Best wishes

Janet

This is the pattern that I established for each of the e-mail interviews with all of my research participants. I have purposely reproduced Chris' responses here verbatim, with spelling and grammatical errors that indicate exactly how she chose to write her story. Chris was a participant who consistently responded quickly. When other participants chose to take

longer, or where responses were brief I usually asked for more detail in the next e-mail exchange. The detail that most participants gave however, frequently covered more than the posed line of inquiry and often raised other issues. I realised very early on that using e-mail for interviews in the way that I was conducting them was indeed producing the in-depth 'rich and complex accounts of their experiences, in their own words' that Gibson (2010, p3) identifies as characteristic of e-mail interviewing.

Seven of the eight participants continued the interview process individually until I had completed data collection with them and no new data was forthcoming. As each storyline was individual to the participant, identical questions were not often asked, however by using constant comparison, questioning was analogous and always reflected the research questions. I kept a tracking record of cycle dates sent and received (*Table 4.2*) to ensure that I was consistent in my communication with each of my participants as planned.

Participant (pseud.)	QS	QR	1S	1R	2S	2R	3S	3R	4S
Nicole	24 Jan	7 Feb	17 Feb	5 Mar	17 Mar	13 Apr	2 May	8 Jun	26 Jun
Chris	24 Jan	24 Jan	17 Feb	18 Feb	7 Mar	8 Mar	19 Mar	22 Mar	10 Apr
Hannah	24 Jan	24 Jan	17 Feb	19 Feb	7 Mar	20 Mar	10 Apr	2 Jun	14 Jun
Jessica	24 Jan	24 Jan	17 Feb	29 Feb	15 Mar	29 Mar	10 Apr	19 Apr	3 May
Sara	24 Jan	24 Jan	17 Feb	3 Apr	22 Apr	7 Oct	Withdrawn		
Mabel	24 Jan	24 Jan	17 Feb	19 Feb	7 Mar	17 Mar	28 Mar	1 Apr	20 Apr
Wendy	24 Jan	24 Jan	17 Feb	27 Feb	14 Mar	26 Mar	10 Apr	6 May	14 Jun
Sophie	24 Jan	30 Jan	18 Feb	7 Mar	19 Mar	10 Apr	1 May	13 May	14 Jun
Participant (pseud.)	4R	5S	5R	6S	6R	7S	7R	8S	8R
Nicole	9 Jul	25 Jul	31 Oct						
Chris	16 Apr	3 May	8 May	14 Jun	2 Jul	24 Jul	7 Aug	29 Sep	30 Oct
Hannah	19 Jun	17 Jul	6 Nov						
Jessica	6 Jun	15 Jun	29 Jun	23 Jul	11 Aug	7 Oct	30 Oct		
Sara									
Mabel	29 Apr	11 Jun	16 Jun	26 Jun	30 Jun 11 Jul	24 Jul	28 Jul	8 Oct	14 Oct
Wendy	17 Jun	27 Jun	5 Jul	24 Jul	9 Aug	9 Oct	28 Oct		
Sophie	29 Jun	21 Jul	9 Oct	10 Oct	14 Oct				
Key: QS/QR: Initial set of questions, sent or received S: Date sent, preceded by number of interview cycle sent R: Date received preceded by number of interview cycle received <b>Data collection completed</b>									

Table 4.2 Research participant e-mail interview tracking 24 January – 6 November 2012

The total e-mail interview cycle varied between five and eight exchanges. Where dates sent and received were longer than two weeks I kept to my plan of re-sending. When this happened I would often receive a reply explaining the reason, for example in her overdue response on 13<sup>th</sup> April, Nicole wrote ‘Thank you for the well-needed nudge to respond!’ and explained that she had visited family over the Easter period which had been busy but enjoyable. This interruption was understandable and resonated with my own personal events which briefly diverted my attention away from my studies when my mother died during the data collection phase. It seemed fair to let the participants know that I had experienced the death of a close family member. The messages of support that I received when I explained that I would be absent for a short while were indicative of the respectful and ethically appropriate research relationships I had successfully navigated with my research participants.

As *Table 4.2* (p.89) shows, Sara withdrew her participation from the study after the second cycle. In her response to the initial set of questions Sara revealed that eight years previously, she had lost a child at the age of two months but had since had two more children. She wrote of mothering:

**Sara:** It is a natural instinct to care and provide for your child. As a parent, well, I have an overwhelming love for my children, I would do anything for them, I love to cuddle them, stroke their faces, and get as much of them as I possibly can. I love spending time with them, teaching them, playing with them. This may be partly down to losing my first child but I don’t know, I think whatever happened in my first experience of motherhood probably shaped the way I look at life, motherhood, parenting

In the first cycle of e-mail interviews I thanked Sara for sharing some intimate and emotive issues with me, summarised her response and asked her if she could enlarge on how she felt that mothering was a natural ability. Following my agreed plan of action, when I had received no response after two weeks I re-sent the e-mail. Sara’s immediate response was “Oh blimey I totally forgot! I’ll get on to it asap. Sorry, Sara”. Four weeks later Sara sent a short response, but after e-mailing the next cycle of questioning she ceased participating in the research. I gave her a third opportunity to respond to a fresh line of questioning and reiterated that research participants have the choice to withdraw at any time and with no explanation, and if I did not hear from her this time I would not send any further questions. I

thanked her for her participation to date. Later, when I started to write up the report of my research I contacted her again to re-establish her consent to use the information she had already shared with me, as I considered it was a relevant contribution to the research data. She replied immediately confirming her consent and wished me luck with the research. Sara made a choice to withdraw and I was ethically bound to respect her position. I reflect further upon this in Chapter Six. The remaining seven research participants however, continued to provide a range of rich data which I compared and analysed using a grounded theory analytical method.

### **The analytical process**

Producing a straightforward flow chart illustrating the process I used to analyse the data was not a simple task. I attempted several visual representations in an effort to convey how I continually worked with the data as it grew and developed. The constant comparative analysis of grounded theory methodology does not facilitate a straightforward linear stage process where one stage is completed before moving on to the next. Stern and Porr (2011) express the difficult nature of representing the process when they assert:

... grounded theory is a matrix operation with procedures occurring sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously, and always back and forth, repeatedly, with each new datum. Ideally, the steps of analysis should reflect more of an iterative rather than linear process.

(p.61)

Birks and Mills (2011) apply the concept of gears to illustrate the interaction of constant comparison, but I was searching for a visual representation that clearly indicated the gradual conceptual process that I employed. *Figure 4.1* illustrates how I achieved this by presenting my analysis through the notion of a funnel, where the simultaneous data collection and analysis is initially fragmented by being continually examined, compared and reconceptualised in the body of the funnel. After time a gradual synthesis and integration between the emerging themes took place during the mapping process which flows out through the funnel as four interlinked main themes, with a central theme running through all, which then generated the resulting theoretical concept, or grounded theory. In short, analysis is first expanded during mapping of all possible elements that could be themes,

then integrated and refined to produce the final overarching concept of the value of the empathetic mother practitioner, illustrated in *Figure 4.1*.

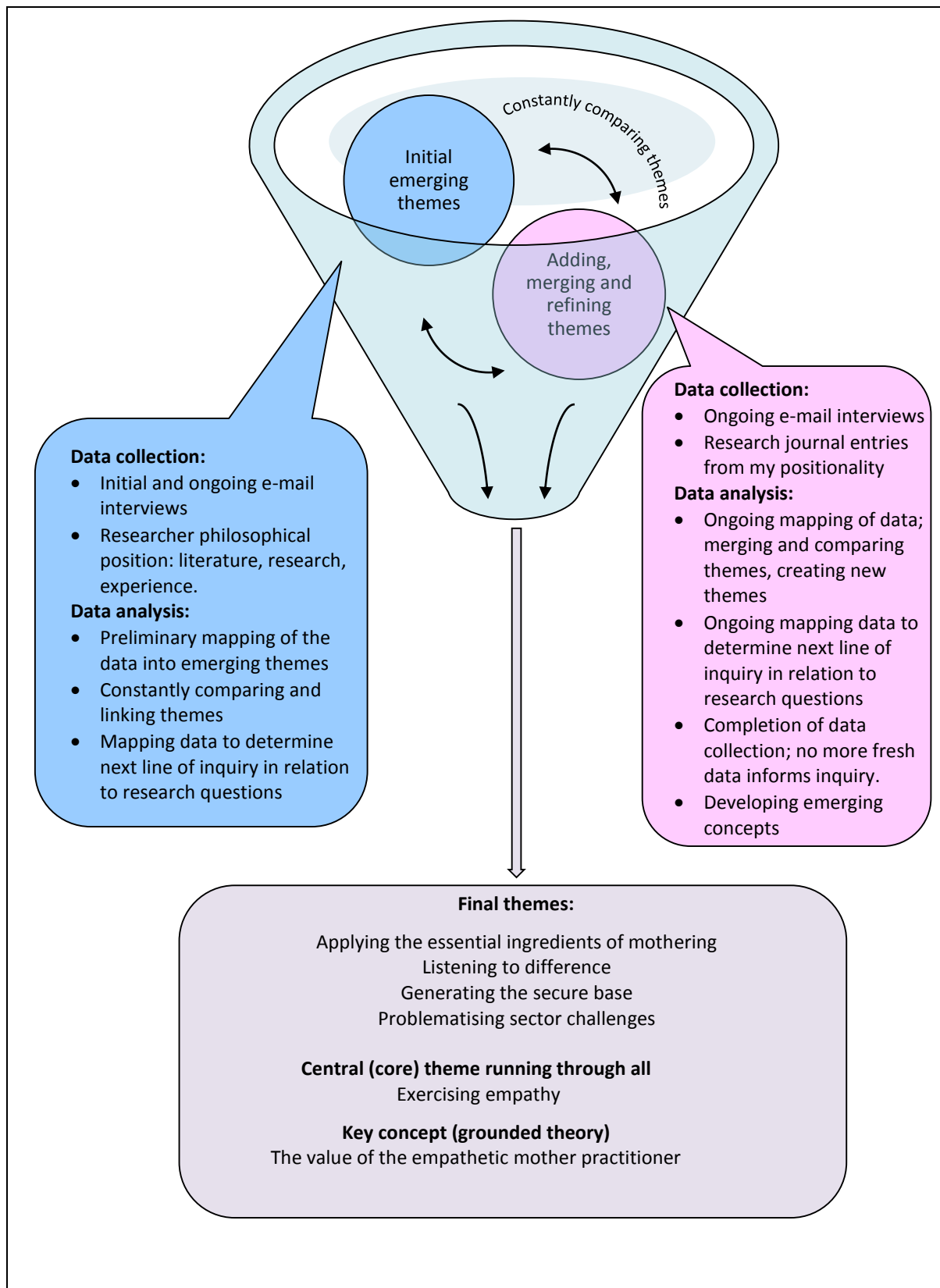


Figure 4.1 The analytical process

## **Coding: mapping the data into themes**

In *Table 4.1* (p.82) I interpret coding as the process of labelling themes that emerge from the e-mail interviews with participants. Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally referred to the coding procedure as ‘coding incidents’ (p.105). Numerous genres of coding have been suggested and developed in subsequent grounded theory literature, for example initial, focused, intermediate, theoretical and axial (Charmaz, 2006), and substantive, open and selective (Holton, 2007). In *Figure 4.1* (p.92) I apply the simple term ‘initial themes’ to refer to the early identification of significant single words, terms or concepts found in the e-mail interview responses, that are akin to Glaser and Strauss’ ‘incidents’ (1967, p.105). As data collection continued with the ongoing e-mail responses, emerging and previously established themes are continually compared with each other. In *Figure 4.1* (p.92) I refer to this as ‘adding, merging and refining themes’. The themes therefore remained fluid, sometimes being integrated with others or establishing new themes. In this way I ensured that all points raised in the interview responses relating to the research inquiry were identified and constantly compared before being integrated into the four emerging final themes as illustrated in *Figure 4.1* (p.92). Using examples from interview responses I will now demonstrate the actual mapping process I applied to each one.

### ***Initial emerging themes***

I adapted the basic concept of Clarke’s (2005) analytical mapping tool to suit this study for mapping themes in order to create a visual, diagrammatic representation of themes which I could keep fluid through additions, connections and integration. Quite simply I wrote the emerging themes on a piece of paper, spreading them all over and not as a list. Clarke’s (2005) concept of situational analysis comprises diagrammatic mapping of all of the elements in the research situation, or context. Clarke (2005) refers to early mapping as creating ‘messy maps’ (p.95), being ‘a perfectly reasonable way of working analytically, especially at the early stages of a project’ (*ibid.*). Like Clarke (2005), I mapped in an informal manner, similar but not identical to Buzan’s concept of ‘mind mapping’ (2002) in which he created a ‘thinking tool’ (p.xvi), that uses codes, pictures and connecting lines. First, I mapped in my research journal, then often on larger scale paper as the volume of new data was added. The maps were indeed very messy with linking lines, arrows, crossing out, and highlighted use of coloured pens. Nevertheless it was a visual diagrammatic tool that I found



extremely useful for this study. The mapping reproduced in this chapter is generated on the computer as copies; the originals and/or photographs of the originals would be difficult to decipher, especially when the maps have been very large.

In response to the first question that set the interview process: 'What is your perception of the term 'mothering'? Perhaps you can give examples from your experience as a parent...', research participant Mabel used bullet points to list her perceptions of the term 'mothering', dividing them between her personal experiences of mothering and those 'for others'. The bullet points offered themselves to easy identification of initial themes (*Table 4.3*, p.95), particularly as she already uses some words ending in 'ing'. A gerund is a word ending in 'ing' that is used as a noun (*Table 4.1*, p.82), initially identified by Glaser (1978) as a way of helping to detect processes in the data, or as Charmaz (2006) clarifies, it provides a sense of action that 'preserves the fluidity of (their) experiences and gives you new ways of looking at it' (p.49). My own use of the term 'mothering' throughout this study is indeed itself a gerund, facilitating flexible and active interpretations. At the initial coding stage I began to use gerunds for some codes that to me immediately offered this facility, graduating to the overall use of gerunds later in the process when the themes were more integrated. I found that applying gerunds where possible ensured that I included all aspects within the data from the start, making it simpler for integration.

Mabel's transcript of her perception of 'mothering'	Initial themes showing gerunds applied
Mothering: Hmm, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being a mum; looking after my daughter with pure unconditional love</li> </ul>	Motherly caring through unconditional love
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing a role model for her</li> </ul>	Role-modelling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being a listener for her worries and anxieties</li> </ul>	Listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting boundaries</li> </ul>	Boundary setting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being there</li> </ul>	Being available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trying not to judge</li> </ul>	Non-judging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stepping back</li> </ul>	Stepping back
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Letting her make decisions</li> <li>Enabling her to problem solve</li> </ul>	Enabling decision making and problem-solving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accepting who she is and what she believes/likes</li> </ul>	Accepting
For others: a similar role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting</li> </ul>	Supporting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being there</li> </ul>	Being available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enabling</li> </ul>	Enabling decision making and problem-solving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitating</li> </ul>	Facilitating progression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening</li> </ul>	Listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not judging</li> </ul>	Non-judging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Modelling and suggesting ways forward</li> </ul>	Role-modelling and facilitating progression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being an objective observer</li> </ul>	Non-judging

Table 4.3 Initial coding of themes in Mabel's perceptions of mothering

I found that by applying gerunds I included aspects within the data relating to the research questions from the start, making it simpler for integration. For example, Mabel's responses in Table 4.3 as a mother and for 'others', are directly linked to the secondary research question '*What factors in the experience of mothering their own children help ECEC practitioners to understand the role parents play in their young children's learning and development?*'. Additionally, Mabel's bullet points: 'Providing a role model for her', 'Facilitating', 'Setting boundaries' and 'Modelling and suggesting ways forward' can more easily be integrated into one theme: 'Role-modelling and facilitating progression' which I have done when applying the gerunds. When mapping Mabel's responses I was therefore able to make links to integrate themes, as shown in Figure 4.2 (p.96) with the use of arrows.

In addition, summarising my interpretations of participant responses and receiving confirmation of my understanding in e-mails facilitated comparative analysis and the merging of themes from the data.

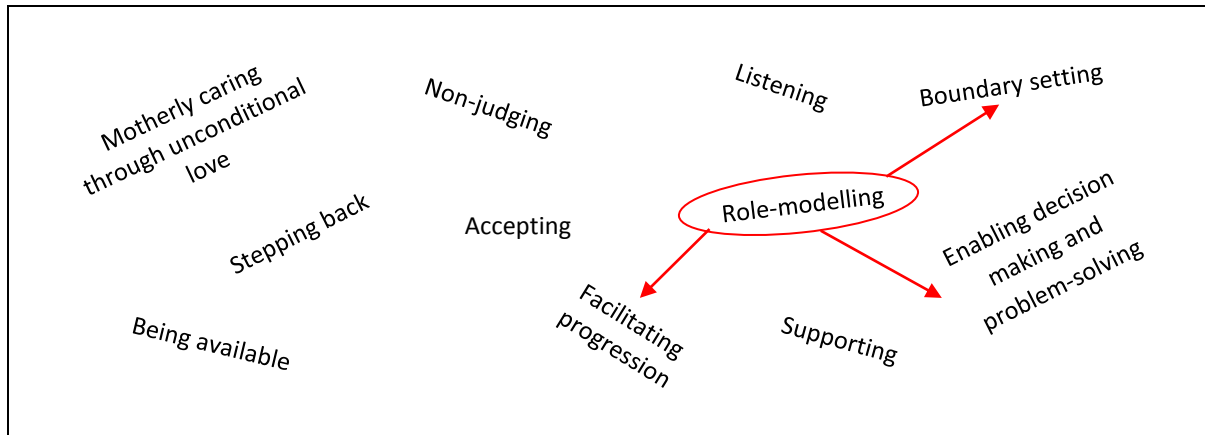


Figure 4.2 Map of Mabel's perceptions of mothering

I mapped themes from e-mail interview transcripts of all of the participant responses, using larger pieces of paper as the data grew, with further mapping to merge themes.

Simultaneously, I noted my own reflections and thoughts on emerging themes in my research journal. These began as tentative scribbles and progressed to more detailed notes and maps as I realised the enormity of working with huge amounts of data that the e-mail interviews were generating. Mead (2001) cautions against immersing oneself in the lives of others in the research field for fear of 'drowning' in data (p.7). Likewise, Seymour (2001) draws attention to the dangers of 'drowning' (p.161) through deep involvement over time with research participants, particularly when applying online methodologies. As soon as the interview process began with the research participants, I found myself immersed in their stories, and almost overwhelmed by the detail contained within the first responses, as I noted in my research journal at the time:

**Research journal entry 20 February 2012**

I am really almost overwhelmed by the rich data I am receiving so early on! I feel I could almost write a book on aspects and different perspectives of 'mothering' which is the first thread I am exploring with my participants. I am feeling incredibly privileged to have this inside peek into others' lives and feelings...I had not really bargained for it...I ponder on it and pull it apart in my mind, then go back to it again. I am receiving rich, intimate and intensely personal detail, told with a feeling of high emotion, much like the experiences that Page (2014) noted in her study of mothers. Some stories resonate with my own, others are completely opposed.

St. Pierre (1997) refers to transgressive data that exceeds the boundaries of expectance, or is 'out-of-category' (p.175) in terms of emotional and other sensitive content. Page (2014) deliberates on this very point, coining St. Pierre's phrase 'troubling the data' (1997, p.177) with reference to her own difficulty in coping with the effect that her research data had on her through the 'expressions of emotion' that her participants made (p.873). Being aware of the meticulous and systematic assembly, assessment and analysis that grounded theory methodology demands (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) it felt right to initially acknowledge the effects of such data. When I received the first responses and began constant comparative analysis through mapping, I revisited the data many times to ensure that I had not missed anything, breaking it down and labelling themes, including the emotional and sensitive content to which St. Pierre (1997) and Page (2014) refer. So rather than drowning in my data I prefer to apply the analogy 'swimming in my data' to refer to constant comparison and the nature of initial theming that I applied. I have frequently made reference to this term in my research journal. I swam back and forth, adding themes as I went, without sinking, to ensure that I did not miss any issue from which new meanings or concepts might emerge. In this way, I accepted the highly emotional content into the data, which in turn helped me to appreciate it as a valid ingredient of the research inquiry.

***Adding, merging and refining themes***

As I 'swam' in my data I created maps for every stage and purpose of data analysis that I considered useful, including mapping my personal reflections in my research journal. Although I initially generated large numbers of themes, I progressed to gradually amalgamating and refining them more. Drawing lines to connect themes as in *Figure 4.2* (p.96) helped to identify the nature of the connection, what Clarke (2005) refers to as

‘relational mapping’, which help to identify ‘which stories – which relations – to pursue’ (p.102). By integrating themes in this way I developed and created a visual record of the ingredients of each of the four final themes, depicted in *Figure 4.1* (p.92):

- Applying the essential ingredients of mothering
- Listening to difference
- Generating the secure base
- Problematising sector challenges

*Figure 4.3* (p.99) is an example of a relational map, showing the emerging theme of ‘Generating a secure base’ that reflected elements of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988; 1965) evident in the data arising from the integration of initial and later themes. The initials in brackets refer to the participant (pseudonym) source followed by the number of interview cycles where the topic was raised by them in relation to the theme, that is:

- N – Nicole
- C – Chris
- H – Hannah
- J – Jessica
- Sa – Sara
- M – Mabel
- W – Wendy
- So – Sophie

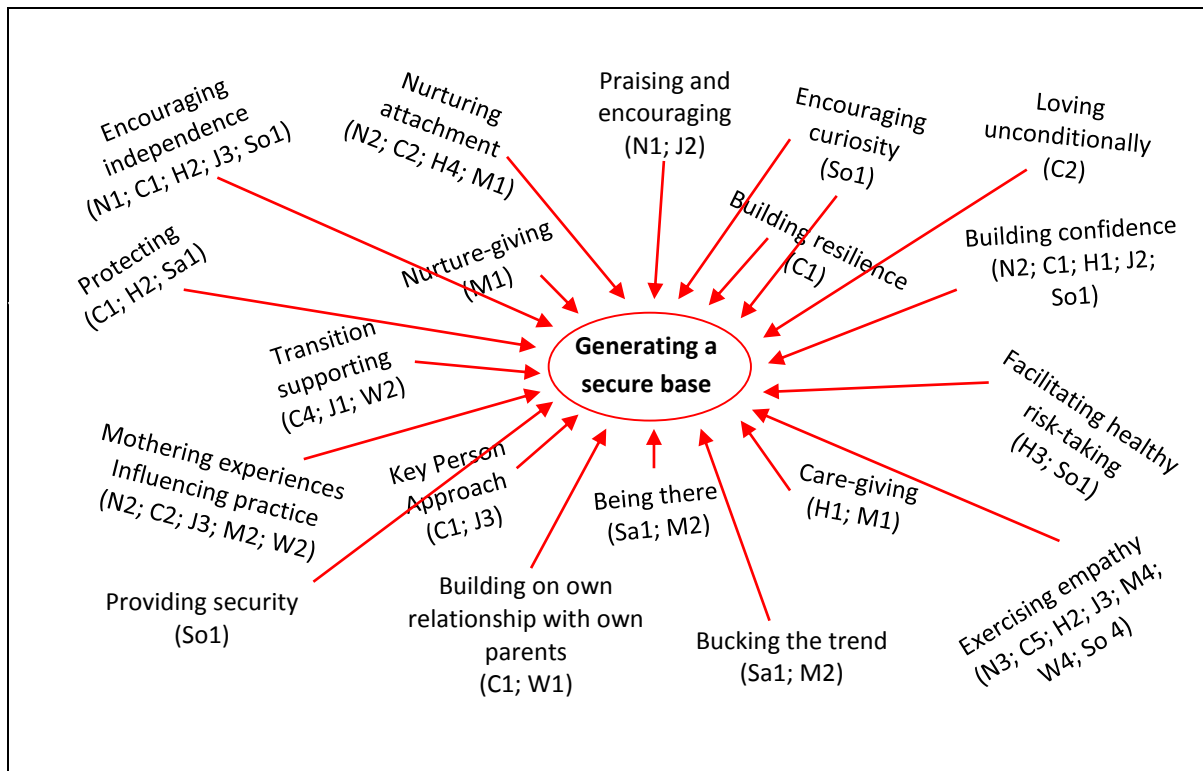


Figure 4.3 Relational map of 'Generating the secure base' integrating codes

Using arrows pointing to the theme 'Generating the secure base' *Figure 4.3* offered a clear visual representation of the integration of other themes into it. For example, by facilitating healthy risk-taking, both Hannah and Sophie are providing a 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1988) from which children can explore safely, which is discussed in the topic literature in Chapter Two. Furthermore, mapping in this way provided an instant reference to elements raised by individual participants within the theme when reporting and discussing the research findings.

### ***Central theme that develops the key concept***

The other three final themes were similarly merged and refined. All four final themes were interrelated, with some elements running through more than one theme. For example, 'Nurturing attachment', 'Loving unconditionally', 'Mothering experiences influencing practice' and 'Care-giving' that appear in 'Generating the secure base' in *Figure 4.3* were also elements of another final theme 'Applying the essential ingredients on mothering'. The element 'Exercising Empathy' that appears in the bottom right hand corner of *Figure 4.3* emerged as the strong core thread running through all of them. The evidence is in *Figure 4.3* which conveys the extent to which the participants raised this issue in relation to

‘Generating the secure base’. Similarly, this core theme had the same presence in the other three final themes. The final themes are therefore essentially abstract and interrelated as Glaser (2007) stresses, and cannot be considered in discrete concrete terms. Each interacts with the others, with ‘exercising empathy’ as a prime thread running through the whole research story. *Figure 4.4* illustrates the interrelatedness through the use of double-ended arrows of the four final themes and with the central theme, or ‘core category’ of ‘Exercising empathy’ placed in the centre. Glaser (2007) states:

... the pressure to generalise a core category is strong. It has grab; it is often a high impact dependent variable of great importance; it is hard to resist; it happens automatically with ease. Researchers tend to see their core category everywhere.

(p.107).

Indeed, I did see evidence of the core category everywhere, it appeared with great ease in the responses from all of the research participants, sometimes as direct reference to ‘empathy’ itself but also in other initial themes that arose and were amalgamated into ‘Exercising empathy’, for example having been in the same situation, having been through similar challenges, seeing things from other parents’ shoes, and listening to and understanding the perspective of parents in the wider socio-economic contexts of the family today, discussed in Chapter Two.

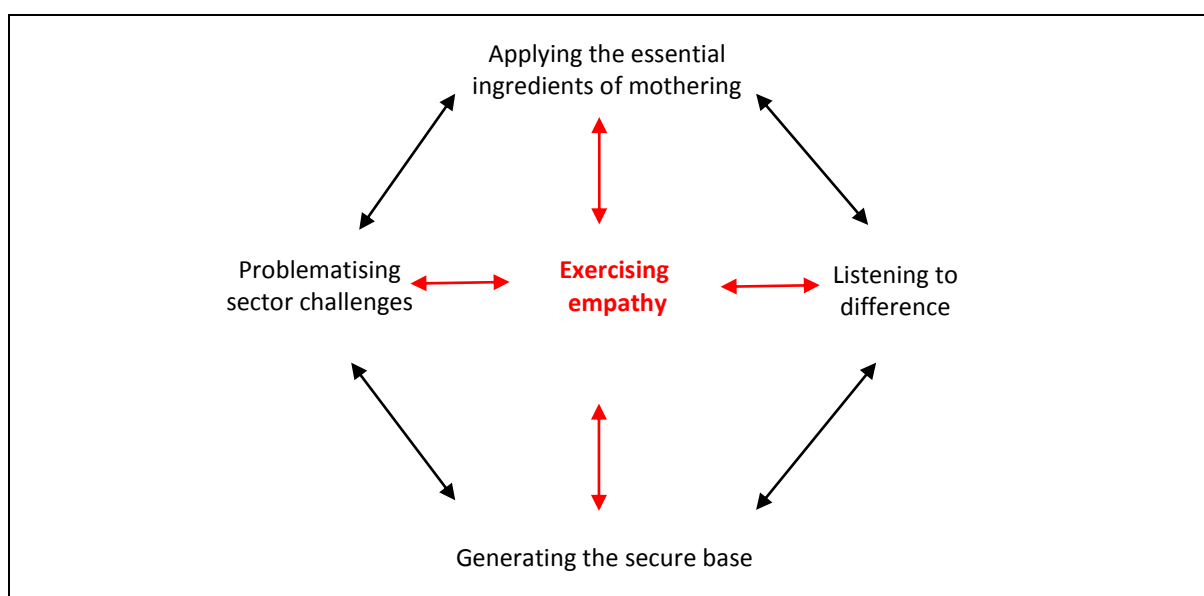


Figure 4.4 The emergence of the central theme arising from the research

Birks and Mills (2001) describe theory as ‘... an explanatory scheme comprising a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns of connectivity’ (p.113). I have explained in my own terminology how I applied a constructivist grounded theory approach to analysis and arrived at a central theme connected to all elements of the research. I return to Stern’s (2007) analogy of ‘growing’ the central concept arising from the research data, that I opened this chapter with. It is the central theme, the core category, of ‘exercising empathy’, that emerged and as the key concept arising from the research.

Being central to all aspects found in the data, it therefore becomes the grounded theory I have grown: valuing a model of the empathetic mother practitioner.

### **Summary: growing a grounded theory**

I introduced the chapter by describing how I gathered research participants’ narrative stories of experience through in-depth interviews by e-mail. In applying a constructivist grounded theory analytical method I grew my theory directly from the data (Stern, 2007). I have shown how I applied the fundamental principles of grounded theory methodology by first demystifying some of the confusing range of terminology relating to grounded theory since its first inception by Glaser and Strauss (1967). I have applied my own terms and visual diagrams to simplify the processes I employed of initial and intermediate coding, whilst applying comparative analysis to the point of theoretical integration and the emergence of the four final categories around a core category. From this core category, my central concept, or grounded theory, of valuing a model of the empathetic mother practitioner arose.

In Chapter 5, I present and discuss the research findings in more detail in each of the four categories, before final presentation of the central concept of the value of the empathetic mother practitioner.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: MOTHERS AS EMPATHETIC PRACTITIONERS: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter Four I explained how I analysed the research data by applying a constructivist grounded theory method, arriving at a conceptual model of valuing the empathetic mother practitioner. Four interrelated categories emerged from the research data that collectively contribute towards the resulting concept:

- Applying the essential ingredients of mothering
- Generating the secure base
- Listening to difference
- Problematising sector challenges

In this chapter I first discuss and interpret the findings in each category, referring to verbatim extracts from participant e-mail responses. I draw on the literature discussed in Chapter Two to develop my argument, and, where fitting, include entries from my reflective research journal to add depth to the discussion. The ensuing conceptual realisation of the value of the empathetic mother practitioner is subsequently illustrated through extracts from the narratives of the research participants. A short summary completes the chapter. Implications for policy and practice arising from my interpretation and suggestions for further research are discussed in more detail in the last and concluding chapter.

### **Applying the essential ingredients of mothering**

Mothering is a key feature of my research inquiry. Through the literature in Chapter Two, I established the research perspective of mothering that I applied to this study as an alternative to the term 'parenting'. Based upon their personal experiences, all research participants identified the elements of love, care, and providing for and supporting their children's development as key ingredients of mothering. I suggest that such responses were to some extent anticipated; however, it was important to establish a starting point for the e-

mail interview process with each participant. In this way I could discover how mother practitioners might draw on their personal mothering experiences to support parents.

Richer emotional dimensions to the basic tenets of love and care became evident in responses, which suggested more than simply being a 'good enough' parent (Bettelheim, 1987; Winnicott, 1964):

**Sara:** Mothering is the term I would use to describe the overwhelming love and desire to look after your child and do the best for them. It is a natural instinct to care and provide for your child.

**Mabel:** Looking after my daughter with pure unconditional love.

Sara's reference to 'a natural instinct to care' compares with the historical assertion of Winnicott (1964) of the innateness of mothering. However, her 'overwhelming love and desire' and Mabel's 'pure unconditional love' suggest emotional feelings consistent with Bowlby's (1965) fundamental 'emotional bond' (p.13) of attachment and literature relating to the nature of maternal love that links emotional security with healthy brain development (Graham, 2008; Gerhardt, 2004; Robinson, 2003). As I argued in Chapter Two, ECEC policy calls for a standardised model of 'good parenting' (DfE, 2014) as the solution to eradicate child poverty (Furedi, 2014; Lee, 2014a; Nelson *et al.*, 2013). Whilst it is relevant to appreciate that advancements in neuroscience help to understand and support young children's development, it is claimed that ECEC and family policy documents in England have been misinformed (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Macvarish, 2014b). The 'birth to three' window of opportunity referred to that highlights it as a crucial predictor for lifelong cognitive development and emotional wellbeing (Moullin *et al.*, 2014; Allen, 2011) places 'no confidence in maternal instinct' Macvarish *et al.*, 2015). I argue that if ECEC practitioners are to support parents with 'good parenting', (DfE, 2014), and participants' experiences of mothering indicate an innate approach, there is potential for mother practitioners to draw upon personal experience to inform and support parents using their personal experience as a reference. If this were so, mother practitioners have the potential to encourage natural instincts with the families that they support.

Additionally, to strengthen this argument, participant responses compare with the feminist perspective of applying an ethic of care as perceived by Held (2006), where the 'lived experience of feeling as well as thinking' (p.23) is perceived as instrumental in meeting a child's needs. Nicole stated:

**Nicole:** I mother my children when they are feeling vulnerable eg tired/ill/miserable to provide the 'extra' bit of emotional and physical support they need to help them ... 'extra tlc by hugs and reassurance'

Nicole's extra 'tlc' (tender loving care) can be associated with Noddings' (2003) assertion of the 'one-caring' who 'naturally feels with their infant' (p.31). Likewise, Meins' (2013; 1997) notion of 'mind-mindedness', is fitting in this respect, as 'caregivers' attunement to their infants' internal states' (p.524). Similarly, Chris wrote of being 'in tune' with her children's needs:

**Chris:** ... my children have quite different personalities ... I feel I am quite 'in tune' with my children's needs and try to take time out to listen, play, laugh and cuddle them.

Chris' attunement to her children's needs, and her acknowledgement of their subtle differences is similar to Wendy's view:

**Wendy:** My children ... were all quite different personalities ... we needed to develop different strategies for dealing with their behaviour and supporting them ... the girls used to complain that we didn't tell (son) off. The truth of the matter was that if he did something wrong we would tell him and he would either accept that immediately or he would take himself off to think about things quietly. On the other hand (eldest daughter) ... could never accept that she might be in the wrong, blaming everyone else for the situation ... eventually she would stop arguing and sulk for a while before admitting her fault and calming down ... it was this kind of learning ... it wasn't enough to say 'well this is what worked with one in the situation' and assume it would work with the others. Each child was very different ....

Wendy's acknowledgement of learning alongside her children indicates not only her appreciation of their uniqueness, but her endeavour to meet their differences with appropriate responses. To me, Wendy's sensitive attunement (Meins, 2013; Ainsworth, 1969b), and her responses to her children's needs suggests that within her home and family culture, with its habitus of values and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1977), there is flexibility to change.

Bourdieu's (1977) social theory complements this; his concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1985) where values and attitudes in the habitus are transferable and influence cultural reproduction, are useful concepts that help to understand how mothering practices can change. Wendy's family values may, therefore, have been influenced by other social fields she has inhabited, for example, work and school experiences, or the pre-natal group she attended fourteen years ago, as she later revealed:

**Wendy:** I felt the classes I attended were aimed at empowering parents to understand their baby and make decisions for themselves about the way they parented. This is the approach I have probably taken in the years since.

Like Sara, Mabel, Nicole and Chris, Wendy's explanation reflects a traditional mothering style similar to that advocated by Bettelheim (1987) and Winnicott (1964), prior to contemporary views of parenting conveyed in policy that I have argued suggest a standardised model of 'good parenting' (DfE, 2014). If mother practitioners were to draw upon their own experiences when working with parents, Wendy's perspective suggests a convincing counter-argument to that communicated in political rhetoric. Her mothering decisions arising from the individuality of her own children have the potential to influence her support of parents.

Wendy and her husband had just finished university when she became pregnant with their first child. As her husband continued his studies and was based at home, they shared the early care of their first child. For this reason, Wendy initially expressed a preference for the term 'parenting' to 'mothering', as she felt the latter 'seems to negate the role of the father'. Wendy's husband's subsequent job roles enabled him to continue to share the care of their children. For this reason, Wendy's voiced preference for the term 'parenting' arose as a direct result of her personal experience of shared parenting. This is consistent with the beliefs of Vincent (2012) who asserts that policy documents refer to parenting simply to convey the inclusivity of both parents. Vincent (2012) asserts that her own preference for the term 'mothering' arises from the simple fact that in reality the majority of children in England are cared for by the mother although other family constructs exist. In Wendy's case, where she and her husband share the care of their children, she refers to their roles as being complementary, however:

**Wendy:** ... we have come to recognise and value the different things we both bring to the role of parents ... the way we shared the responsibility for the children wasn't a case of one taking on another's role, but a case of providing care for our children ... In my professional experiences I have also felt that different approaches to siblings and from both parents can help in situations I have been involved in or asked to advise on. However I also feel that the different approaches need to be working together. My husband and I haven't always succeeded in this and this has given me empathy towards parents I have encountered who were struggling to make changes in the family due to different approaches between the parents.

Wendy provided an early indication of how her approach to raising her children and her personal experiences are reflected in her practice, where she has worked in a professional role, not only with mothers, but extensively with fathers:

**Wendy:** I have always felt that it is important for parents and families in general to feel in the driving seat of the development of their lives. Therefore I have offered advice and examples from my own life but have encouraged parents to decide what they need to prioritise in their own families ... I feel that if parents understand why they are making the choices they make they are more likely to repeat the choices rather than if they were following instructions from advisors/parenting experts.

Wendy's reference to parenting programmes was spontaneous and her re-emphasis of the way that she learned how to understand what was best for her own children compares with the much affirmed assertions of Lee (2014b); Jensen (2010); Gillies (2005) and Vincent (2000); that parenting has become a public domain in which one accepted model of the good parent is the accepted norm. The parental autonomy and thinking that Wendy advocates is not the uniform model of good parenting in policy (DfE, 2014) but one, I argue, that offers a wider view of mothering, that can be compared with the assertion of Rogoff (2003) that 'each generation continues to revise and adapt its human cultural and biological heritage in the face of current circumstances' (p.3). Additionally, this associates with Reay's (2015) concept of 'Bourdieu with feelings' (p.9) in which she argues for a psychosocial perspective that deepens and enriches the concept of habitus. Reay (2015) asserts: 'the mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations within which they are enmeshed' (p.10) creates a connection between psychology and psychoanalysis, and society and culture. Chris wrote:

**Chris:** I think my mothering style has come from my background and core values – family is vitally important in supporting an individual; love, affection, providing for their needs, communication and respecting others.

However, her experiences, which have influenced her work with parents reveal her strong emotions. When she had her first child, Chris describes how she was dreading returning to her teacher role out of necessity after having spent a year at home with her son. She worried that she would have no time for him, and resented spending her time marking and planning. Although her son was in a good nursery where she knew the staff well, Chris hated leaving him:

**Chris:** On reflection, I think that my anxiety possibly transferred onto (son) ... I remember being at a baby massage group with him, crying and crying that I had to return to work and leave him. I think I was very upset at the thought of leaving him and returning to a job that made me unhappy ... Over the year he had times when he was truly upset, the owner phoning me to say he couldn't be reassured all day. I often went in for a chat to listen and suggest strategies ... My husband thought I was probably too over sensitive ... it's just that protective instinct. When they are very small and you cannot be there as a parent, you want to ensure that your child's every needs are met ... unfortunately as a 1yr old he had no choice but to go into childcare. I think the guilt of that has always stayed with me.

Chris' expressions of emotion are synonymous with the findings of Page (2014) who researched the choices, beliefs and dilemmas of mothers returning to work. Page's participant Lucy described herself as 'so mixed up emotionally' (p.868), likewise Page's participant Martha told of feeling 'distraught' and 'absolutely and completely traumatised' (p.870) after leaving her daughter at nursery for the first time. Chris' strong emotional feelings, I suggest, have influenced her 'dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72) in her collective habitus, and her experienced feelings during her son's transitions have informed her work with parents in her current role as a Children's Centre teacher:

**Chris:** My approach is quite informal with parents. I often discuss my experiences and use these as examples to show empathy or strategies to help ... I always try to let the parents talk through their emotions and then discuss practical issues ... from my experience as a parent and my child starting school I try to make my transition sessions as thorough and parent led as possible. Issues round emotional readiness for them and their children ... I think the main thing I have taken from being a parent into my work ethic is that every parent wants the best for their child, sometimes they just need reassurance or support ... I use every opportunity in my sessions to reinforce to parents that they are the 'expert' on their child; they are the ones aware of their child's needs, likes and dislikes, etc.

Both Chris and Wendy's responses reflect Reay's (2015) psychosocial concept of emotions influencing the habitus, and her call for a form of emotional capital that contains 'emotional resources' (Reay, 2000, p.569).

The 'core family values' that Chris referred to, and the notion that values and practices of mothering are passed down through generations varied across research participants experiences:

**Hannah:** I'm the 1<sup>st</sup> of 5 siblings in my family and family gatherings are a regular occurrence. (Son, 21 months) has close bonds with his auntie and uncles ... I would say that (son) has some really strong attachments ...just recently we have been having a battle for (son) to say please which is very important to me, he would say please to his childminders family but no one else ... 2 weeks ago he started to say please for his youngest uncle (15) ... Me and his dad were a little aggrieved, so I was a little mean the next night and had the battle with him, he wasn't allowed his bedtime milk/cuddle until he said please ... since then he has shown lovely manners for everyone ... my mother says I've always treated him older than he is .. (my) youngest brother was definitely babyed for far too long ... I was 13 when (brother) was born and really enjoyed looking after him.

Hannah presents an image of a large and close-knit English family, where although there are times when mothering has been a shared activity, there are also examples of generational differences in opinions and practice. Ruddick (1989) writes of 'maternal practice' which 'begins as a response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world' (p.17). This response, according to Ruddick (1986), involves demands which arise from the child and the social environment they inhabit. Ruddick (1989) identifies these demands as '*preservation, growth and social acceptability* – (they) constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance and training' (p.17). Perhaps Hannah perceives her role as one of 'training' her

son to say 'please' as an important aspect of social acceptability. I suggest that this could also reflect her professional role in the nursery, where teaching children to say 'please' and thank-you' may be used within the setting culture to address the EYFS requirement to 'understand appropriate behaviour in groups' (DfE, 2014, p.8). However, Hannah expresses some emotion regarding differences of opinion in the family about the right time in her son's development to do this. I suggest that this may arise from the influence of the values in her ECEC professional role that now are part of her collective habitus (Bourdieu, 1985). Sara wrote:

**Sara:** I think if your own mother was very loving towards you, you would learn from that and follow similar feelings as a mother yourself. But saying that some people wouldn't describe themselves as natural mothers so maybe there has to be some natural ability ... my own mother would not describe her mother to have been very motherly but my mum is a wonderful mum to me.

I asked Sara to describe in more detail how she felt that mothering involved a 'natural ability' that some mothers, like her grandmother, did not have:

**Sara:** I don't think that everyone can have a natural ability ... it's a feeling of sheer love and protection that washes over me when I look at my children. I do wonder whether it's also because I grew up with my mum showing her love not only on me but her minded children. I have always been very comfortable around young children, knowing how to interact with them. This is possibly due to my own natural ability and also observing my mum.

Sara's reply was the last response before she made her early decision to withdraw from the research process (discussed in Chapter Three), and so I was not able to pursue her meaning in any further depth. However, Mabel raised a related experience:

**Mabel:** I did not have a close relationship with my mum and I remember talking to my sister and saying that I would give my children what my mum did not give me ... We are not a close family and may be that is something that I have strived to provide for our daughter; a reassurance that I will always be there no matter what. Whenever she asks for a cuddle I give it, no matter how inconvenient ... I don't think that good mothering is necessarily handed down. My mum wasn't a bad mum, but we just never were that close, in my eyes.

For me, receiving and reading Mabel's response was particularly poignant as it resonated with my own experiences, views and memories as I noted in my research journal:



**Research journal entry 17<sup>th</sup> March 2012**

I received a response from Mabel today ... I kept re-reading it and looking back at her previous responses for evidence of links. In her role as a specialist teacher she has described how she HAS to build partnerships with parents and so she has many facets to her mothering style, sometimes mothering the parents themselves. I had asked Mabel where these characteristics had come from, as she had added in an earlier response the reflection: 'So then I ask the question, who mothers me??' Without knowing it, in her reply today Mabel had described my own feelings, but these were her feelings about her mother. She didn't know how I had felt, I had not disclosed it.. I remember how I felt as a child, and I can remember thinking that I too would treat my own children differently and vowing that I would always listen to them. Mabel actively chose to mother differently from her own mother as a result of her experiences as a child, and I'm also beginning to see that she applies these same qualities to her working role. I compared Mabel's story to my own, and to Sara's comment about her mother and grandmother.

It seems that positive experience may be a key – when family experience is positive mothering has potential to be passed down through generations, but when it is received negatively, the opposite happens. I thought of Wane's article about mothering in Africa, and how traditional cultural influences remain in the family with the telling of stories of mothering through generations even though mothering styles develop and embrace new concepts and cultures over time. This needs unpicking more ...

Grappling with the analysis of this unexpected commonality caused me to ponder on the relevance of the part played by negative childhood experience, and also whether the common vocation and knowledge base of ECEC had a part to play in Mabel's and my perspectives too. Wane (2000) suggests that new understandings based on socio-cultural influences and generational experience can influence mothering styles as it clearly has done here with Mabel and me. I propose that professional experiences and influences play an equal part, in particular when negative childhood memories can be explained through understanding the importance of close attachments. My ECEC career came after I became a mother, but like Sara I had always enjoyed being with children. I asked Mabel whether she felt her experiences contributed towards her choice of career, in particular as a specialist teacher when she works with children and parents who require a very particular type support:

**Mabel:** ... As a teacher/teachers, we often talk about the cycle of parenting and that without positive role models the children will know nothing but to repeat what they have been used to ... (interestingly we do not talk about this with children who receive positive parenting) ... I had no direct role model or offers of support to look to. I had memories of what I had been done to as a child and knew that I did not want to continue this ... I don't know how or why I chose teaching as my career or why I followed my specialist path ... I do feel drawn to these children and their families ... I hadn't attributed this to anything to do with my childhood experiences but I do think that being a teacher and having my own child has had a lot to do with how I now see children and their families and enabled me with a greater depth of understanding as to how and why both children and parents act/behave the way that they do.

Like Wendy and Chris, Mabel places value on her own experiences influencing her practice. The 'cycle of parenting' that she refers to is synonymous with Sir Keith Joseph's historical 'Cycle of Deprivation' speeches in 1972 and 1973 (Welshman, 2012), that focused on 'intergenerational poverty' (Nelson *et al.*, 2013). As I discussed in Chapter Two, the views expressed by Sir Keith Joseph triggered increased political gaze on the problem of child poverty and the subsequent political notion that bad parenting is to blame for the ills of society (Furedi, 2014). Mabel refers to 'teachers' and 'we' as well as herself as an individual teacher which suggests that she is speaking generally for teachers as a particular social group with its habitus of accepted values and beliefs. However, from a psychosocial perspective, her negative experience and feelings as a child have had the effect of influencing her resolve for change, in providing a role model for her own daughter and the families and children she works with.

Contemporary thought on attachment seeks to address relationships beyond Bowlby's (1969; 1965) mother/child dyad, and consider wider influences such as cultural practices and implications from research in neuroscience. Nevertheless, like Taggart and Elsey (2013), I contend that Bowlby's perceptions of the emotional aspects of attachment are useful in certain contexts. Based on his own observations of troubled families, Bowlby (1988) argued that childhood experiences, whether good or bad, are passed down correspondingly, even though the majority of parents wish to be successful parents. Bowlby (1988) advocated: '... we seek always to teach by example, not precept, by discussion, not instruction' (p.19). Bowlby (1988) here is acknowledging that by providing positive role models, it is possible to intercept the cycle of parenting that Mabel refers to and appears to have achieved in her personal and professional roles.

I have shown that the mother practitioners raised several valid factors regarding their experiences of mothering. They were, not surprisingly, unanimous in identifying the important elements of love and care that were essential in the mothering of their own children. As the research process developed and I delved deeper into the participants' personal and professional lives, the participant narratives revealed a range of knowledge and experiences that influenced their professional practice. These experiences not only derived from first-hand mothering, but included a combination of professional knowledge and experience which the mother practitioners in this study drew upon in their work with parents.

The professional role of the mother practitioner is unavoidably closely aligned to their personal experiences in the sense of the endeavours involved in caring for babies and young children. In Chapter Two I discussed how attachment theory manifests itself as instrumental in the implementation a KPA through the provision of a secure base (Bowlby,1988). In the next section I discuss the findings in the category 'Generating the secure base', which further develops the discussion thus far.

### **Generating the secure base**

In this category I draw on the fundamental concept of a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) to demonstrate how the research participants in this study provide an environment at home and in the workplace that supports young children's development and learning, and therefore would seem to be well-placed to support parents in this respect. Although participants did not apply the term 'secure base' themselves when recalling and recounting their experiences, I justify its significance in relation to the data analysis (*Figure 4.3, p.99*) and the literature in the discussion that follows. This category begins to link the experiences and ingredients of mothering implicit in nurturing independence, confidence and curiosity with professional practice and the implementation of a KPA, now a mandatory requirement in the ECEC policy framework in England (DfE, 2014).

Participants identified how they facilitate their own children's positive learning dispositions of independence, confidence and curiosity to explore and take risks within a safe and secure environment:

**Nicole:** Being a parent reinforced and cemented the importance of independence for children ...

Nicole, already a nursery worker before she became a parent, makes reference here to parenthood consolidating her professional understanding of the importance encouraging independence. Hannah, the lead professional in her nursery, also revealed her understanding through the eyes of her son:

**Hannah:** ... A mother ... lets them take risks and discover things for themselves, as well as developing their own independence and drive to explore ... (son) observes what people do with things and then explores what he can make them do ... this way of exploring through play will encourage him to want to learn through life and critically analyse what impact they may have on his life.

Jessica and Sophie explained how they encouraged their children to explore, but within the boundaries of a safe and secure environment:

**Jessica:** ... guiding them to become well-adjusted, confident and happy adults ... being a good role model and giving praise and encouragement ... doing your utmost to protect them from harm or danger whilst still encouraging independence.

**Sophie:** ...then into the toddler years ... safety equipment everywhere to protect her and keep her safe, allowing her the freedom to explore ... Vowing to encourage her to be confident and independent ... usually with no more than a 'be careful'.

Jessica and Sophie wrote about the protective, safe boundaries they provide whilst allowing their children to explore and take risks. As Sophie described, by signalling a note of caution in the use of the term 'be careful' she acknowledges to her daughter that there is a sense danger; yet at the same time this acknowledgement provides reassurance that Sophie is nearby and that her daughter can return to her 'secure base' at any time, particularly during periods of self-doubt in order to 'top-up' her confidence.

Bowlby's analogy of a secure base from which children make 'sorties into the outside world' (1988, p.11) is a comparison with the provision created by the commanding officer of a military base to retreat to that is safe and secure after military manoeuvres. In Bowlby's words, '... it is only when the officer commanding the expeditionary force is confident his

base is secure that he dare press forward and take risks' (*ibid.*). I suggest that Jessica and Sophie similarly provide a secure base for their children. The elements of a secure base for children's healthy emotional development are therefore twofold: the availability of a safe, secure environment from which to explore and learn about their wider worlds, and secondly affording protection, comfort and nurture. The securely attached child, through sensitive mothering (Meins, 2013; 1997; Ainsworth, 1969b) and appropriate 'tuning-in' to their needs, feels protected through such a loving relationship; enough to be able to explore the wider world. Appropriate attunement (Meins, 2013) links with the discussion in the previous category 'Applying the essential ingredients of mothering' regarding the application of empathy in 'mind-mindedness' to understand the appropriate needs of the child. Similarly, like Jessica and Mabel's previously highlighted provision of a role model, Chris described how she uses the same strategy to provide a secure base:

**Chris:** I see my role and my husband's to act as a positive role model and extend the boundaries of experience for our children. I try to encourage the 'have a go' approach, and that feeling confident in their own endeavours will lead to inner strength of character.

The confidence and strength of character that Chris and her husband develop by providing a secure base compares with Hannah's description of her son observing others and then trying things for himself, and the positive impact this will have on his learning for life. The qualities that participants demonstrate in providing a secure base seem to show that they are able to translate this into their professional practice, as Sophie, a childminder, illustrated with her approach to a Care to Learn placement (*see Glossary and Abbreviations, p.viii*):

**Sophie:** At present I have a Care to Learn placement. A 5 month old baby and his 16 year old mum. At our initial meeting, while she was pregnant, Mum commented that babies "aren't very interesting as they don't do anything". As a result I have modelled play activities with her when she arrives from school to collect her son. I've played with the baby on the floor mat and highlighted his responses for her to see. I complete a daily diary of her son's activities and routines and write up what I have been doing with him, illustrated with photos for her to see. She now more fully appreciates and understands her son's innate ability and desire to learn and has taken on board hints and tips I have given her. When I explained the importance of eye contact and showed her how to reconfigure the pram she was using she has continued to have the baby facing her so she can talk to him while they are walking home.

Sophie's acknowledgement of her tacit understanding of the importance of 'eye contact' is an important factor in providing close attachments and a secure base with children, and is reflected here in her practice. In Chapter Two I discussed how the provision of a secure base through the KPA underpins ECEC policy and practice (DfE, 2014) which in turn has been informed and influenced by developments from neuroscience. Cozolino (2006) asserts that eye gaze and eye contact are essential for social communication. The brain's plasticity at birth (Gerhardt, 2014; Swaab, 2014; OECD, 2007) allows a flexibility that is influenced by interactions with the environment *and* people, particularly through the close nature of the relationship between infant and mother, or main carer.

The influence of science upon the social worlds and development of small children can be seen here and is reflected in the psychosocial theoretical framework I have applied to this study. I have shown how the mother practitioners in this study draw upon their varied mothering experiences and given examples of how these experiences influence their practice. Through the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu (1986; 1985; 1977) however, I argue that the habitus of mothering provides a useful insight into the wider aspects that mother practitioners have to offer in their practice. Wendy referred to her 'amalgamations' of experience that she draws upon:

**Wendy:** In relation to my "amalgamations" that I have used as examples for parents these tend to be elements of my experiences which reflect things that actually happened to me, or I am aware of, but not necessarily things which all happened at the same time frame as my anecdote may indicate. For example, I was giving one parent some support over her son's behaviour and I used my own son as a reference. However some of what I related to her was not actually based on my son but on another child who I had had at the preschool around the same time ... I could see links between the issues she was having with her son and the techniques I had used with mine. By adding in the experience with the other child, it seemed to speak more to her situation and also revealed (to me) some learning that I had had over the situation ... I sometimes use snippets of information I've come across on training or in reading to add to the advice I give, but in such a way that I show I have also just come across this information ... So my amalgamations tend to come from my parental experiences, my professional experiences, things I've learnt and the need of the situation.

I reflected upon Wendy's response:

**Research journal entry 12<sup>th</sup> May 2012:** Wendy's 'amalgamations' have caused me to reflect and look deeper at other participant links between professional work and personal experience. When considering my research questions and line of inquiry I had not considered the benefits of a combination of experiences that include the personal experiences of mothering as well as professional knowledge and experience ... Wendy also uses professional examples of children to strengthen her work and support with parents. Does this pose an ethical or moral dilemma? Is using examples of other children while only using her son as a point of reference unethical? Deliberating on and pulling apart these troublesome issues, I concluded that by using her child as a single point of reference, Wendy protected the confidentiality and identification of another child which could have raised deeper ethical dilemmas. Wendy also identifies her own learning in the situation that they were discussing, and ultimately provides a better support to the parent. This is reflective and reflexive practice I think. Wendy strives to meet the needs of parents appropriately, looking for multiple experiences to draw on empathetically that relate to the situation at hand. This is quite sophisticated practice. Perhaps this is what Elfer (2012) was referring to when he offered Elinor Goldschmeid's concept of our 'internal textbooks'?

I could see how Wendy's description of her 'amalgamations' associated with Elfer *et al.* (2012), who refer to the 'personal' and 'professional' (p.72) perspectives of implementing the KPA, and Goldschmeid's notion of 'our internal textbooks' (cited in Elfer *et al.*, 2012, p.76). Wendy's 'amalgamations' immediately set in motion more mapping of comparisons in the data to look for links and meanings as I drew them into my research analysis. Other participants made similar references:

**Hannah:** I use experiences of all my brothers when dealing with parents.

**Chris:** I feel that I have applied my theoretical knowledge to my own parenting style ... I don't think I would be so empathetic and patient towards parents and children if I wasn't a parent myself. I think my approach would be more 'theoretical' based rather than listening and interpreting what parents and children's needs were and how to provide support.

**Sophie:** I can totally empathise and with knowledge I have gained through training and my FD have been able to support the family ...

**Nicole:** I started my family AFTER gaining childcare qualifications and experience in nursery and so I feel that the experiences and knowledge gained at work influenced my skills as a parent ... As a parent I feel I know my children extremely well – much better than children at nursery and this inside knowledge enabled me to see the positive effects of their self-learning, however small. This in turn helps me look closer at the children at work.

**Mabel:** One element that I think being a mum and being a teacher can have a very positive impact upon is child development and an understanding of what children need as they develop and so recognition that things may not be going according to plan and therefore can support the child and their family to help get the support and services they need.

Continually revisiting the data through the constant comparison of grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), revealed that when the mother practitioners in this study supported parents, they drew upon an interrelatedness of experiences, in which mothering their own children was an important facet of value. Of added significance though, is the fact that in all of the above cases, this information came voluntarily from the participants in general discussion; that is, without any direct related question to connecting personal and professional experiences and the application of empathy. In view of this discovery in the data, I argue that viewing these revelations through a Bourdieusian lens enables one to see how habitus is dynamic, due to its 'durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72). The values and attitudes held within the family habitus of the participants inherent in their mothering practices are also transferable between the 'fields' they inhabit. For example, on the evidence thus far, and in addition to participants' ECEC professional understanding and theoretical knowledge, such fields might include Wendy's ante-natal group and her fathers' groups; Chris' transitions groups and the field of working mothers; Mabel's specialist teacher groups of families and support networks; Sophie's Foundation Degree (FD) relationships; and Hannah's wider family cultural field.

The data indicated the understanding of the importance of providing a secure base for children at home, showing how examples were shared empathetically with parents. The additional indication that participants draw upon their own mothering experiences *as well as* their professional knowledge base in their work with parents is a significant finding. In particular, Wendy's description of her 'amalgamations' reinforces the positive impact that her tacit knowledge and experience and intelligent insight has on building relationships with parents. In applying this approach, she looks beyond her own mothering experience to skilfully meet the individual needs of parents. I propose that this approach has implications for future policy and practice, when personal experience is recognised as an element of value towards building meaningful relationships with parents. This is discussed in more detail in the final chapter, but building relationships with parents also requires an understanding of the importance of acknowledging difference, which is discussed in the following category.



## Listening to difference

In this category and through the data, I argue that working with parents requires an ability to recognise and appreciate the uniqueness of all families. I apply Rinaldi's (2006) term, 'listening to difference' (p.139) as a fitting principle to this category. The interpretation grows from the value of subjectivity within each person arising from environmental contexts and social interaction, and argues that 'it is necessary to be receptive to this subjectivity, to recognise and support it' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.139). Rinaldi (2006) advocates a 'pedagogy of listening' (p.140) to enable practitioners not only to develop an awareness of difference but to recognise and accept the changes that take place within themselves through listening to such difference. Rinaldi (2006) asserts that humans come to recognise otherness, but tend to develop a negative perception of the other, which creates a 'culture of normality' in which dominant practices are the accepted norm. In Chapter Two, through the literature, I discussed the unfair practice of othering, and applied the term 'social class othering' to the perceived divide between working-class and middle-class norms. In the first category 'Applying the essential ingredients of mothering' I discussed how Chris and Wendy both acknowledged the individuality of their own children, and so have already indicated how they support differences within the family by adapting their mothering skills appropriately. Recognising individuality, and the related value of being non-judgemental extended to professional roles with children and families:

**Nicole:** The value of individuality – I have always (to the best of my ability) respected and encouraged individuality within my work at nursery.

**Sophie:** ... I strive to be the positive in the day of all my minded children – it's far too easy for my mood and outlook to make or break their day!

Nicole acknowledges here that although she respects individuality at nursery, she adds in parentheses '(to the best of my ability)'. Such acknowledgement infers the possibility that sometimes unconsciously she may not always appreciate difference. Similarly, when talking about differences, Sophie applies the term 'strive' which translated can imply a struggle, especially as she admits how easy it is for her mood or outlook to influence the day of her minded children. Struggle was openly acknowledged by Jessica and Mabel in respect of children's behaviour:

**Jessica:** I do find it difficult when I find some parents have such a different approach ... especially when you can see how it affects the children's behaviour. When I first started at the nursery I did struggle with trying to see things from another parents perspective as I think as a parent yourself you sometimes feel the way you parent is the best approach.

**Mabel:** I try not to judge my daughter or the children that I teach, but it is very hard to let some things go and not be critical ... many of the families are concerned with the behaviour of their children at home ... and expect me to have the solutions to their problems.

It seems that Jessica's inner struggle is with the conflict between how she feels as a parent and her knowledge that as a practitioner, parents' views need to be respected and acknowledged. Her immediate thinking resonates with the findings of a study by Page and Elfer (2013) which explored attachment interactions in the nursery, where '...staff adopted a largely intuitive approach to such attachments, drawing on personal experience rather than a body of theoretical knowledge' (p.564). However, the findings of this study are suggesting differently, as Jessica's professional awareness became evident after deeper questioning:

**Jessica:** Over the years I have come to learn that parents wishes need to be taken into account and respected, even if I as a parent disagree ... I do try and tell parents, especially ones of my key-children how important their role is and let them know their child's strengths.

Mabel's comment that families expect her to have all the answers signifies the pressure she feels under in her role as a specialist teacher and how the parents she works with construct her as 'the expert'. I interpret this to mean that these parents wish their children to be perceived as 'normal', not different. They do not want to be perceived as 'the other' but lack the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to instigate this for themselves, as Mabel identified when she elaborated:

**Mabel:** I teach children who are extremely disadvantaged and those who are not. Most come from loving families who love their children unconditionally and want to do their best for them, and others love them, but cannot do their best for them because of their lack of knowledge or they put other things first.

Mabel's reasoning compares with Reay's (1998a) findings that differences in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985) available to some families disempowers them. Reay's adaptation of cultural capital (1998b) includes the characteristics of material resources, educational knowledge and qualification, social confidence and educational information - features that I propose may not be easily accessible to the families that Mabel supports. Therefore, I suggest, they assume the perception of Mabel as 'expert' who is armed with the solutions to make their 'different' or 'othered' child 'normal'. Mabel's role-modelling, however, indicates her understanding of the families' differences in cultural capital through listening to difference, and by drawing on her personal and professional knowledge and understanding, applies an empathetic approach through role-modelling that will empower them. Rinaldi's (2006) argument that listening to difference requires an understanding of an individual's subjectivity challenges Bourdieu's stance of individual agency and subjectivism, yet in Mabel's example I can appreciate 'Bourdieu with feelings' (Reay, 2015), by placing this study into a psychosocial theoretical framework.

Equally, I propose that participants' admission of struggle with family differences combined with the application of a pedagogy of listening compares with Fine's description (1994) of the self and other being 'knottily entangled' at the hyphen, a metaphorical bridge that lies between them. Fine (1994) refers to such a hyphen as being a space where fixedness is eroded, and 'we and they enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate' (p.72). I argue that the mother practitioners in this study 'work the hyphens' (*ibid.*) and apply a pedagogy of listening, as opposed to 'resisting' otherness, which Krumer-Nevo (2002) suggests creates a 'reciprocal' power gap. Krumer-Nevo's view, (2002) I maintain, does not create mutual respect but in fact reinforces the act of othering, creating a power relationship of 'expert' and 'non-expert'. Fine (1994) talks of working *with* her research participants, and when writing about research conveying the struggle in engaging *with* informants, instead of writing *about* those they have othered (p.72). Fine believes writing *about* others denies the hyphen, whereas working *with* them generates richer data. I can see a similarity in Wendy's thinking:

**Wendy:** ... I have always thought of my work as being work 'with' families and not 'for' or 'to' families" ... (this) particular child has some difficulties behaviourally, but I have tried to ensure that the parents are aware of their child's abilities outside of this concern. Therefore in the parents evening I concentrated on what the child could do, and left aside the issues with behaviour ... we would be meeting again around that area.

Wendy's efforts to 'work the hyphens' (Fine, 1994) involves not only listening to the concerns of parents but ensuring that parents are aware of the positive qualities of their children as well.

I suggest, therefore, that the authentic revelations of struggle by research participants are not an initial dismissal arising from passive reflection but active reflexivity in practice. Indeed, Jackson and Needham (2014) assert that reflexivity entails having an awareness of what, why and how both others *and* oneself behave. Lahman (2008) defines reflection as thinking about something after the event, and reflexivity as happening before, during and after the event. Schwandt (2007) maintains understanding others requires 'being prepared for the other to speak to us (thus treating the other as a being to be met, not an object to be viewed, tolerated, or disregarded' (p.215). Mabel identified listening as crucial to her work with parents:

**Mabel:** At parents' evening next week I will give her an hour. It's more for her to talk and me to listen, than vice versa. Her personal mothering session ... Many of my parents at school also need this reassurance ... that there will always be someone there to listen who will not judge.

Mabel's powerful message suggests that the 'listening' application of listening to difference is a crucial part of 'working the hyphen' (Fine, 1994) with parents to break down the barriers, help build trust, and develop respectful relationships. Chris gave a similar example:

**Chris:** I met a parent at one of my transition workshops in school who had a younger child. She discussed how she never did that much with the younger child because she felt guilty about the older one missing out. I listened and gave examples from my situation (life is busier with two children, fitting in work and making sure you give each enough time and energy, and not feeling guilty!) ... I believe that a practitioner's level of training, understanding, listening skills and personality, are key factors in having empathetic understanding when communication with parents.

Schwandt (2007) emphasises that dialogue and conversation are the foundations upon which mutual understanding emerges. Kline (1999) refers to 'attentive listening' (p.37) that is 'enzymatic' (*ibid.*). Reading Kline's position contributed towards my own thinking on listening to difference as well as that of the participants. I wrote in my research journal:

**Research journal entry July 27<sup>th</sup> 2012:** I'm reading Nancy Kline's 'Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind' (1999). She has developed the concept of a 'Thinking Environment' of which attentive listening is a key factor. She writes: 'Attention, the act of listening with palatable respect and fascination, is the key to a Thinking Environment. Listening of this calibre is enzymatic. When you are listening to someone, much of the quality of what you are hearing is your effect on them. Giving good attention to people makes them more intelligent. Poor attention makes them stumble over their words and seem stupid. Your attention, your listening is that important' (p.37).

How do I think about difference in relation to my research participants? I am not physically sitting in front of them in a face-to-face interview to give them my attention. They can't see me, but I do effectively 'listen' attentively to their narratives of experience as they write them and email them to me. My 'receiving' of their stories is in the interpretational summaries I email back to them and the further lines of inquiry I take with them – I hear them and am interested – 'fascinated', they in turn receive and 'listen to' my responses to their stories I have heard, and subsequently write more, delving deeper into their experiences. To do this, as a researcher, I have surely applied a certain empathy – I have placed myself in their shoes in an attempt to objectively summarise their subjective stories ..... and to try to understand how they feel ...

How do they listen to parents? Are they attentive, do they think about it, and do they exercise empathy? Wendy's 'amalgamations' immediately come to mind again – she has heard the parent's situation through attentive listening, and whilst the situation was not identical to that with her own son, and so different in some respects, she draws upon other experience and knowledge to support this parent. Wendy's 'thinking' in order to support this parent empathetically has created some learning for herself too. Wow!

I look for more in the data. Mabel gives a parent an hour at parents evening to 'listen' – 'her own mothering session'. The parents at Mabel's school have children who are perceived and treated as 'different', but are fully understood and supported by Mabel. Chris identifies listening as a key factor in exercising empathy. Chris and Wendy both later refer to taking time to find out about the children's different backgrounds (by listening) in order to understand their learning needs. It's there.

My journal entry contains my abstract self-interrogation as I think and try to pull these issues together. I suggest that in addition to my own reflections on the analysis of the data, Wendy applies attentive listening in her work with parents, through her amalgamations,

drawing upon that which she has learned over time from a variety of sources and experiences.

The research data reveals that the relationships between these seven mother practitioners and parents are clearly located within a climate of Rinaldi's 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 140), and where 'attentive listening' (Kline, 1999, p.37) is applied in their work, often as a result of initial social class othering. Lahman's (2008) assertion that any social relationship is 'always othered' is therefore palpable.

So far I have argued that the seven mother practitioners in this study all draw upon their own mothering experiences to support the parents of the children that they work with, enabling parents to provide a secure base for their children. They use their own experiences by applying an empathetic approach to supporting families going through similar experiences. What has emerged from the data is the benefit of the *cumulative* benefits of personal experience *and* professional knowledge and understanding that helps mother practitioners to listen to and appreciate difference in contemporary family life, and tailor support directly to the needs of families. The constant value of drawing upon the personal domain of mothering found in the data therefore continues to raise proposals for ECEC policy and professional practice, discussed in the last chapter.

The research participants worked in a range of ECEC settings. The data revealed several references to the challenges faced when working with parents across the diverse composition of the ECEC sector. The final category, 'Problematizing sector challenges' therefore brings these issues to light with reference to the research line of inquiry.

### **Problematizing sector challenges**

This category explores disparities across the ECEC sector that became evident in the research data in relation to the primary research questions. Therefore, whilst maintaining the continuing interconnectedness between categories, I identify participants' personal and professional experiences captured in the back and forth e-mail exchanges with me which indicate variances of practice across the sector when working with parents. In particular, realities between schools and private, voluntary and independent (PVI) provision were

raised in relation to the implementation of a KPA. Furthermore, data indicated the perception of an education/care divide, discussed in Chapter Two, from both practitioner and parental perspectives, with the nature of childminding practice making a significant contribution to this argument.

In Chapter Three I explained how I applied ‘purposeful selection’ (Reybold et al, 2013, p.699) of research participants in order to reflect the diversity of setting within the ECEC sector.

*Table 3.1* (p.48) demonstrates how I achieved the selection of eight participants to represent a range of roles that included teachers working in schools and children’s centres, a specialist teacher, nursery and pre-school workers, and a registered childminder.

When asking ECEC practitioners working in different roles how personal experiences of mothering might influence and inform their practice with parents, it is pertinent not only to acknowledge how roles might differ but also to explore the extent to which barriers are overcome and/or challenged by research participants. Thus, to consider such an analysis whilst remaining within the scope of the research inquiry entails directly relating the data presented in this category to the data and discussion in the three previous categories. Consequently, discussion of the findings in this category will problematise the sector challenges of disparity by considering how participants working in different roles apply the essential ingredients of mothering, generate the secure base and listen to difference. Thus, this section will simultaneously draw all categories together, with the emerging core category of ‘exercising empathy’ running through all of the categories.

Jessica spoke of the difference in delivery of a KPA from the perspective of her pre-school role as a key person (DfE, 2014) and her experience of her son starting school:

**Jessica:** When (son) started in Reception I found it was completely different to the open door policy our setting operates. If you needed to see his teacher you have to ring the school office to make an appointment and couldn’t have any ‘small chats’ with his teacher before he went into class. I found this quite hard at first as I had gone from him having a key person who was happy to chat to me before and after sessions to an environment that I felt was rather closed to parents ... I felt if Reception classes are meant to follow the EYFS then the parents as partners area clearly needs to be improved in schools.

Even though Jessica's son was assigned a key person during the settling in period, the role did not compare with her own professional role as a key person:

**Jessica:** I was told (son) would have (a) named key person whilst he settles in and this person's main role is a TA. This role was referred to as a Key Person and I was given her name by letter when he started school. She did introduce herself to me by name and advised me that she would be there to help him settle in. At first ... I was pleased. However I found that the role was different to my role as a key person at nursery and whilst his key person was pleasant I felt I had to ask her how he was, when I felt the information from her should be more forthcoming rather than me asking ... it is apparent that a school is going to be run differently from a nursery ...but I feel schools are still concentrating far too much on attaining the Early Learning Goals for their reception year ...

Whilst Jessica acknowledged logistical differences, her feelings compare with the findings of a study by Shields (2009) prior to the introduction of the EYFS (DfE, 2014) with its increased focus on partnerships with parents. The parents in Shields' research into their perceptions of the transition from nursery to school felt that 'school doesn't feel as much of a partnership' (p.237), and 'daily feedback and updates on children's progress were replaced by a significant wait for the first parents' evening' (p.245). Such a comparison serves to question whether things have in fact progressed with the added focus on partnerships with parents in the revised EYFS (DfE, 2014). Drawing on her experience of working with both state and PVI settings, Chris acknowledged the difference:

**Chris:** I believe that 'time' is a key issue in schools. It seems that teachers are often stressed by the demands made of them in school (marking scrutiny, results & targets, etc) and as a result, time spent with the children is often very focused (academically). Time spent talking to parents is very limited, although I have seen many attempts in schools adopting a more flexible approach to transition and letting parents into the nursery and reception classrooms (to settle their child, get a feel of what the classroom looks like and the routines) and actually spending time talking to the parents on a daily basis. I feel that when this happens, you get to know the parents better and as a result they will often confide in you. Some practitioners who welcome this approach often have a greater understanding and empathy of children and their families".

"Day care settings seem to have greater time and smaller groups to allow a more personal and thorough approach ... getting to know the child and their parents in more depth than in schools. Visits can occur over longer periods of time and because of staggered pick ups and numbers in each key person's group they often have more time to discuss things with parents. This might allow for a more holistic view of the child. Some practitioners are mindful and knowledgeable about their key children. Again, I think it can be down to personality types, own experiences and the ability to empathise.



Chris identifies 'time' as a key issue in schools, sometimes due to the bureaucratic demands placed upon teachers. Jessica's reference to schools 'still concentrating far too much on attaining the 'Early Learning Goals' within the EYFS (DfE, 2014) confirms Chris' point. However, Chris highlights that many schools are now becoming more 'flexible' in working with parents. Nevertheless, Jessica's personal and professional experiences of the disparity of KPA delivery are real and raise deeper issues of policy and practice. The question in the context of this thesis is how mother practitioners recognise the problems of disparity across the sector yet find ways to build and maintain meaningful and supportive relationships with parents.

In the first and second categories, 'Applying the essential ingredients of mothering', and 'Generating the secure base', I have discussed how Chris draws on her personal experiences empathetically with parents when facilitating her transition sessions. In the same categories, I discussed Wendy's use of her 'amalgamations', her collective personal and professional experiential elements, in her work supporting parents. At the time of the research data collection and analysis, Wendy was completing her Early Years/Key Stage 1 Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) after working in a pre-school environment. During her teaching practice in schools, she observed:

**Wendy:** (A school) with a predominantly white, British and middle class intake. The teacher did not seem to know anything about the children's backgrounds, family situations, etc, and when I suggested explanations for things she was struggling with over specific children, which stemmed from the knowledge I had of the children and their backgrounds, the teacher was not open to the idea that their backgrounds were connected to their learning needs.

(A school) with similar intake ... but with a significant element of less settled families and more families beginning to experience difficulties ... The staff had very little knowledge of the children's backgrounds. Some children were well cared for, as they were from families experiencing more need and with the involvement of other agencies. However other children who potentially were on the cusp of falling into this category, were not.

I have used Wendy's teaching practice experiences as a fitting demonstration of differences between state schools and the PVI sector when engaging with families. Whilst Wendy was completing her PGCE in schools, she already knew the backgrounds of some of the children from her pre-school role in the same geographical area, but her suggestion to the teachers

that their learning needs were linked to their socio-cultural backgrounds was not accepted or understood. Had these teachers been working more closely with parents, the issues that Wendy addressed would have been better understood.

Wendy's comments illustrate the interrelatedness of the categories that emerged from the data analysis. The data referred to above equally sits well in the category 'Listening to difference', and correlate with Bourdieu's (1977; 1985; 1986) social theory and the concepts of habitus and cultural capital. In Chapter Two, I argued through research (Duncan, 2005; Tizard and Hughes, 2002; Reay, 1998a; Vincent, 1996) that some teachers, as a result of the values and accepted norms deeply embedded within the habitus that abounds in the field of teaching, are guilty of social class othering. Wendy's suggestions to the teachers regarding the children's learning needs illustrate how the practice of social class othering continues long after the aforementioned research studies. I asked Wendy whether her work with parents would change once she was a newly qualified teacher (NQT):

**Wendy:** I am hoping that my focus won't change. Partly I think it will depend on the parents and whether they are open to a more partnership style of working ... because I am an NQT, I feel I cannot bring all my own values to the role yet. However once I have a permanent position I would be looking to develop the role to involve parents much more ... I am worried that my personal beliefs in what is right in terms of parental involvement will be at odds with the school ... I am worried that the pressure from higher up the school may force me to focus more on the learning than on the care of the children.

Wendy's concerns and respect here may reflect the bureaucratic pressures on schools previously discussed, however her hopes of drawing on her previous experiences and knowledge are commendable.

The perceptions of a care/education divide from parents and professionals perspectives were also raised in the data:

**Chris:** ...there has seemed to be a divide between the two (childcare/education). I also feel that schools see childcare as a different thing to education; childcare – where the children are more dependent on adults to meet their needs. Children have to be out of nappies and able to use the toilet, feed themselves and to a degree dress themselves (more independent).

**Wendy:** I have experienced parents who saw the pre-school years as play and not learning, and despite many attempts to show them how their child learnt through these playful experiences, they focused on the “learning” aspect of their child’s early years on the school experience. For example I had a parent who would ask for and take on board advice about her son’s behaviour, but kept asking me why I wasn’t teaching him to read. I had to explain that at just three years old, being the child he was, he wasn’t ready, but she didn’t want to hear this from me regardless of how much she respected my opinion on other matters. I invited an advisory teacher to our parents evening to speak specifically about readiness for reading and this parent took this information on board when it came from the “teacher” even though we had been saying the same things, almost words for word! The teacher expected the children coming into school to be “pupils”, ready to learn and completely capable of controlling their emotions, managing their own needs etc. Some of the children were only 4 years old and the expectations seemed to be out of step with the EYFS.

Both Chris and Wendy’s experiences reflect that perceptions of a care/education divide continue to remain, despite the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008) covering the entire birth to five age range, that aimed to integrate care and education, in recognition that learning and development are interrelated (Pugh, 2010b). If all ECEC practitioners are to build relationships with families and take account of care needs, the problem of inconsistency across the sector remains problematic. These inconsistencies however, are not solely observed in the state/PVI divide. The choice that parents are afforded across the range of PVI settings also throws light on inconsistencies of practice in relation to working with parents.

In the first category, ‘Applying the essential ingredients of mothering’, Chris shared her experienced of her first child’s transition to nursery when she returned to teaching, and the emotions that she felt at the time. Hannah, the lead professional in a nursery, and Mabel, a specialist teacher, both explained how they chose childminders for the care of their children:

**Hannah:** As a practitioner I hoped the childminder was doing the right things for him, making him safe and offering him a balanced diet, but over time I began to trust her more and more... I worried that he would form a stronger attachment to the childminder, but as time went on I can now appreciate the bond they share, but it’s not the same as ours. However I personally would not have taken (son) to a nursery at 9 months, I believe that children should be in a home environment with smaller ratios ...

**Mabel:** It's interesting upon reflection, that I chose a mature childminder rather than day care for my daughter (a home from home experience for her and this lady became my second mum let alone hers and was the person to whom I looked to for advice rather than my own mum).

Hannah raises comparisons between her role and that of the childminder she chose for her own son. She feels that 'a home environment with smaller ratios' would be better for her nine-month-old son, clearly observing differences between her practice in the nursery environment and the personal preference for her son. Similarly, Mabel refers to wanting a 'home from home experience' for her daughter. Comparable findings regarding 'homely' environments were found by Brooker (2014), where childminders believed that parents chose childminding provision because it is 'home-like', a 'home from home' (p.7). Findings from a wider research study by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) (Fauth et al, 2011; 2013) equally found the home environment paramount in parental choice of setting. Hannah's professional understanding of attachment issues initially seems to be clouded by the strong emotions she experienced, however her initial concern was soon dispelled on this realisation, correlating with Page's theory of 'professional love' (2011) whereby such an attachment does not rival the bond between mother and child but complements it, as put forward by Ayesha in Page's (2014) study. Nicole explained:

**Nicole:** As a parent I feel I know my children extremely well – much better than children at nursery ... the emotional attachment ... I mean the relationship between parent and child is much closer, more intimate ...

Nicole reinforces Hannah's recognition of the differences in primary and secondary attachments (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth and Bell, 1970) and the association with Page's 'professional love' (2011, p.320). Page (2011) concludes that mothers in her research wanted practitioners to love their children and that this was a vital contribution towards mothers' decision to return to work, even though it was not always referred to by mothers as 'love' (p.320).

Hannah and Mabel's references to their children's childminders however, do reflect a more intimate relationship not afforded in other setting types. Mabel's acknowledgement of her daughter's childminder being '... like the mum I had always wanted to have' is related to

the negative experiences in her relationship with her own mother discussed in the category ‘Applying the essential ingredients of mothering’, but also reveals the nature of a closer personal partnership between parent and professional. In order to analyse Hannah and Mabel’s parental perspectives and choice of PVI provider, I examined childminder Sophie’s professional role with parents in more detail. With the constant comparison of grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) I revisited Sophie’s responses to date, trawling through every response in order to ascertain the full extent of Sophie’s contact with parents. Consistent with every aspect of analysis of the data, I mapped all of these facets of Sophie’s contact with parents in my research journal, by using arrows pointing to them (*Figure 5.1*):

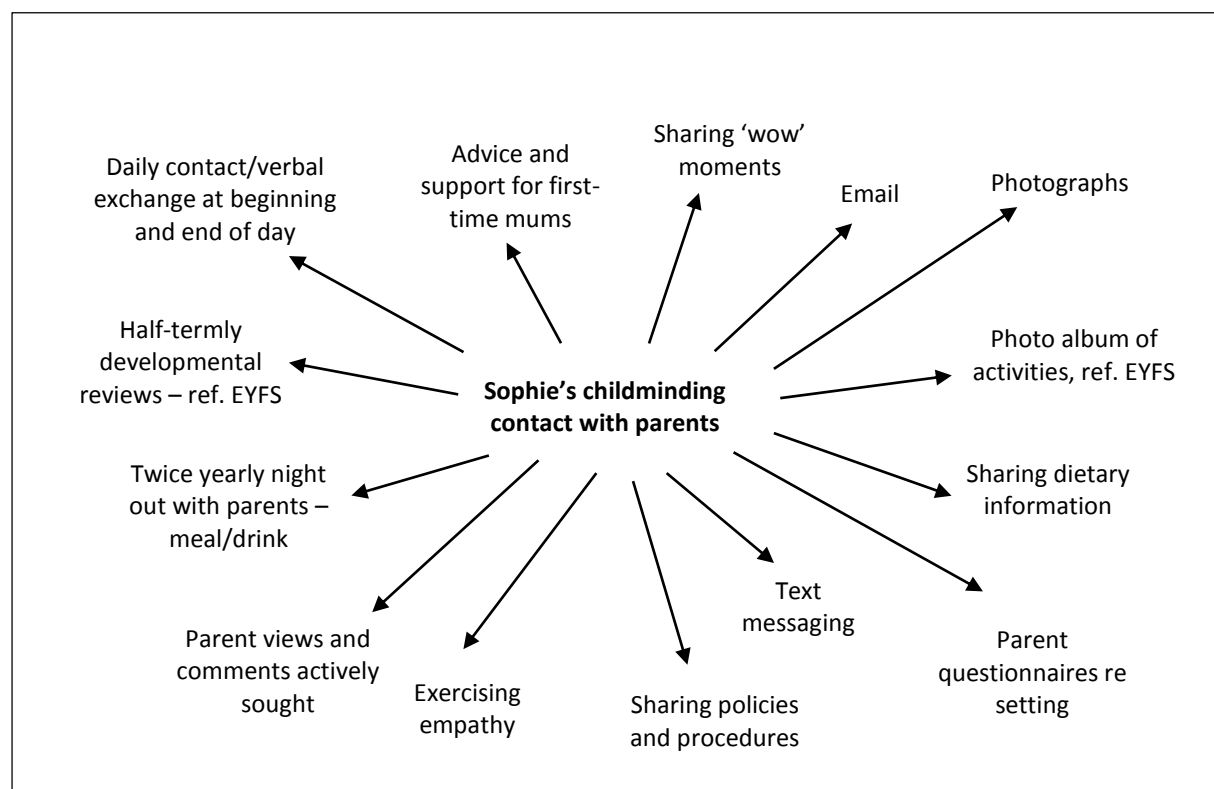


Figure 5.1: Research journal entry mapping of Sophie’s extent of her childminder work with parents

*Figure 5.1* reveals a relationship unparalleled in the examples of contact with parents as reported by my participants in the other types of setting. As a childminder in her own home, Sophie’s one-to-one contact with parents is more informal, affording time and place to be more comprehensive. Mabel supports this notion of informality in her reference to her daughter’s childminder who she said became her ‘second mum ... the person to whom I

looked to for advice'. For Mabel, a qualified teacher with a wealth of specialised experience with young children and families, I suggest this confirms the depth of trust in the partnership that she valued with her daughter's childminder. I propose that in her role as mother, Mabel had a different construct of her identity. In turn, it influenced the work she does with families of children with additional needs and facilitates empathy, evident in the reference in the previous category 'Listening to difference' to 'At parents evening next week I will give her an hour. It's more for her to talk and me to listen, than vice versa. Her personal mothering session'.

Brooker's (2014) research revealed tensions between the maternal and professional aspects of childminding practice, by what she referred to as "expert' and 'common-sense' contributions' (p.1). Sophie's contact with parents reflect both of these aspects (*Figure 5.1, p.130*) linking photos and albums with the EYFS (DfE, 2014), providing developmental records linked to the EYFS (DfE, 2014), and on the other hand offering first-hand advice and support for first-time mothers, social nights out to share information informally and exercising empathy. The common sense versus expert argument correlates once again with Bettelheim's philosophy where parents 'do their own thinking' about their children (1987, p.377), previously discussed. Employing both of these aspects in her work with parents Sophie uses her personal and professional experience. Such practice therefore correlates with Elfer's (2012) notion of using experiences from 'personal and professional lives' (p.76).

I have demonstrated through the experiences of the seven mother practitioners who participated in this study that sector differences in setting impact upon working closely with parents. Chris and Wendy both work hard to combat the logistical and bureaucratic barriers that they themselves identify as problematic in schools. Sophie's practice as a childminder has shown a depth of working with parents that is not possible in other settings, and both Mabel and Hannah's choice of a childminder for their own children indicate their understanding and appreciation of these differences. The solution to the disparity across settings in delivery of a consistent KPA remains an issue for policy discourse that is wider than the scope of this study. However, through the narratives of seven mother practitioner participants, received during in-depth e-mail interviews, I have shown how their personal mothering experiences were integral to practice in their work with parents.

## Mothers as empathetic practitioners

From the evidence in the data, the mother practitioners in this study drew upon their personal experiences of mothering in order to support the families they worked with. They identified exercising empathy through the eyes of a parent to be a key feature of value:

**Nicole:** I am able to put myself in their shoes better than before I was a parent.

**Jessica:** I feel being a mother has really helped me in my pre-school role ... you can definitely use your experiences to advise parents ... and have an understanding of the bond between parent and child and how emotionally attached you are to your children.

**Hannah:** I don't think I would feel as confident passing on advice to parents if I hadn't had these experiences ... I wouldn't be able to empathise with them.

**Mabel:** I really do think I am a better teacher because I became a parent, because I have an inside knowledge of children and also different strategies to suggest to others based upon my own experiences. I feel that being a parent can offer empathy towards others ...

**Chris:** I do think that being a parent myself has had a huge positive impact on my practice. I don't think I would be so empathetic and patient towards parents and children if I wasn't a parent myself. I think my approach would be more 'theoretical' based rather than listening and interpreting what parents' and children's needs were and how to provide support.

**Sophie:** I think I would have learned (it) in the purely academic sense but I'm not sure that I would have understood and been able to apply (it) in the way that I do. I feel that it's the empathy that strengthens my relationships with the parents ... they say that they prefer to ask someone who has been through it.

**Wendy:** I think that being able to use real examples of my experiences has helped other families to relate to me, and help to build a relationship of trust between us ... Yes I think that being a parent can strengthen a practitioner's ability to support parents ... I do think it adds a something extra.

The data therefore suggests that the seven mother practitioners in this study, working in various roles across the ECEC sector, found that being a parent provided them with an extra quality that facilitated an empathetic approach towards building respectful relationships with parents. Furthermore, participants' *individual* experiences helped to support families experiencing similar challenges to the ones they had experienced themselves. Additionally, the research participants employed a combination of personal and professional knowledge and experience to meet the needs and concerns of parents. Listening to parents was seen to

be a prerequisite to understanding their needs; but whilst participants acknowledged a struggle in listening to difference, indicating a degree of social class othering, by 'working the hyphens' (Fine, 1994), they were able to draw on a combination of their accumulated personal and professional experiences to support parents.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have discussed the findings of the research study within a psychosocial theoretical framework and in relation to the literature in Chapter Two, with the inclusion of reflective notes from my research journal to strengthen argument. I have discussed the findings under the four interrelated categories that emerged from the data analysis described in Chapter Four: 'Applying the essential ingredients of mothering'; 'Generating the secure base'; 'Listening to Difference', and 'Problematising sector challenges'. This was followed by extracts from the narratives of the research participants that suggest that being a parent can offer an added empathetic dimension when working with parents in ECEC settings, that, when combined with professional knowledge and experience, adds value to the relationships that they form with parents.

In Chapter Six, I present the conclusions from the research study, and address the contribution to the professional body of knowledge and the implications for policy and practice arising from the research study. Some final reflections complete the thesis.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

### Introduction

In this final chapter I first present the conclusions drawn from the discussion and interpretation of the data in Chapter Five by revisiting and responding to the research questions. I follow by addressing the implications arising from the study, in which I offer suggestions for policy and practice arising from the findings and identify the contribution to a professional body of knowledge. Proposals for dissemination and further research that have the potential to build upon the findings in this study are presented.

I put forward my critical reflections in relation to the research process, before closing with some personal reflections upon my doctoral learning journey.

### Conclusions from the research findings

Through ongoing e-mail interviews, the resulting narratives of the seven mother practitioners who participated in this study showed a multidimensional empathetic approach when supporting parents in their professional roles, of which drawing upon their own mothering experiences was perceived by them as a component of value. The mother practitioners drew upon a combination of their professional and personal knowledge and experience, but it was the empathetic approach arising from being a parent themselves that enabled them to better understand parents, build relationships with them, and support them in their children's learning and development. The primary research question asked:

*How might ECEC practitioners' personal experiences of mothering influence and inform their working practice with parents?*

Two secondary questions posed:

1. *What factors in the experience of mothering their own children help ECEC practitioners to understand the role parents play in their young children's learning and development?*

2. *How do these factors influence the relationships that ECEC practitioners form with parents?*

In response to the research questions collectively, the findings discussed and interpreted in Chapter Five established that in their professional roles, the participants were proactive in supporting parents by:

1. Using examples from their own mothering experiences, in particular those identified as natural and of an affective nature, to support parents empathetically and build trusting relationships;
2. Demonstrating skill and sensitivity when drawing upon, and sometimes integrating personal experiences with professional experience and theoretical knowledge to better understand and tailor the support to individual parents' needs, particularly relating to the nature of young children's development and learning;
3. Providing a role model for parents that reflects both a personal and professional understanding of attachment theory and the provision of a secure base, which underpins the KPA in ECEC policy and practice;
4. Striving to understand and appreciate issues of socio-economic and cultural difference in changing contemporary times through attentive listening to parents to meet their needs, thus breaking down barriers to building relationships with parents;
5. Meeting the challenges of ECEC sector diversity across setting types that impact upon opportunities to listen to and work in partnership with parents as demanded in ECEC policy through a KPA (DfE, 2014).

These five conclusions answer the research questions and summarise the findings. I will consider each of the above conclusions in turn to address the implications arising from the study before identifying the contribution to knowledge that the research offers.

### **The implications arising from the study**

This study did not seek to discover whether parents make better practitioners because they have personal experience of raising children; neither did it intend to suggest that practitioners who are not parents can or cannot apply empathetic approaches in their work

with parents. It is an inductive study in which I generated new theory from the data, and in which the research questions deliberately confined the scope of the inquiry to one specific topic: how the practitioners in this study, who all happened to be mothers as opposed to fathers, might draw on their mothering experiences in their professional roles with parents. In addition, it is pertinent to stress here that this study does not focus on gender implications with regard to mothering: in Chapter Two I argue through feminist literature that mothering is simply my preference to the term 'parenting', being a nurturing endeavour fulfilled by fathers as well as mothers. I have established the value that the mother practitioners in this study all placed upon their personal experiences as crucial to their professional roles when working with parents. However, and critically, how this value is translated and utilised to maximise the beneficial development and knowledge of all ECEC practitioners across the sector in their working roles with parents is the key to consistent, professional practice. The implications for policy, practice and further research are therefore considered in the light of the five findings summarised above.

### ***1. Exercising empathy***

Exercising empathy was the core category and concept, or grounded theory, which grew from the data analysis and was identified by all participants. How the participants applied empathetic approaches to their work with parents was specifically related to being a birth parent themselves; however, it can be argued that empathy itself as an affective attribute does not suggest the necessity to be a parent to appreciate and support the diversity of contemporary family structures and practices. In Chapter Two I referred to research by Broomhead (2013) who found when trainee teachers listened to the stories told by parents of children with SEN it helped them to develop an empathetic understanding of the challenges these parents faced. In addition, my research participant Hannah describes her son as having strong bonds and attachments within her wider family where mothering is often shared. It is evident that the wide experiences within family traditions can provoke empathetic behaviours not only from birth parents but other carers. Similarly, my research participant Wendy explained how her 'amalgamations' of personal and professional knowledge and experiences help her to tailor the appropriate support to families, not solely her experiences as a parent.

Exercising empathetic responses to parents' circumstances and desires therefore, although clearly perceived by the participants as an element of value drawn from parental experience, ought not be an exclusive practice to ECEC practitioners who are parents. With increasing demand for professionalism in ECEC to appreciate the affective domain of practice (Davis and Degotardi, 2015; Taggart, 2014) this research highlights the importance of developing the qualities applying empathetic responses to parents. Thus, providing more opportunity within ECEC settings for sharing personal experiences amongst staff as well as parents and capitalising upon them is a good starting point. Such practice could not only serve to value the personal in the professional within the setting, but would facilitate good practice when considering a key person for each child, and ultimately contribute towards the development of empathy in others.

## ***2. Integrating the personal and the professional to meet the needs of parents***

This study has shown how (mother) practitioners blend personal experience with professional knowledge and understanding to build relationships with parents. When family life with young children shares commonalities with caring for them professionally it can become problematic to disassociate the two, as personal experiences make up part of 'our internal textbooks' (Goldschmeid, in Elfer *et al.*, 2012, p.76). I suggest that such a factor of value demands recognition not only in practice but by policy makers; indeed, as Ball (2013) asserted, both Prime Minister David Cameron and previous Prime Minister Tony Blair frequently viewed education policy from the perspective of being a parent. I suggest that what seems to be a simple, common-sense concept arising from this study has the potential to enrich lives by enhancing cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986); not only in ECEC practice and policy, but in other caring professions where personal experience can help to understand others, for example in nursing, care home practice and counselling.

## ***3. Role-modelling good practice***

At grass roots level in ECEC settings, management recognition of the personal qualities of practitioners arising from personal experience would benefit from being acknowledged, including those of parent practitioners, to optimise practice through role-modelling, for example, in the practice of baby rooms. In their Baby Room research project, Goouch and Powell (2012) found that the least qualified staff, aged between 16 and 25, worked with

babies. Page and Elfer (2013) assert that practitioners working with babies and young children should be 'highly qualified and emotionally resilient' (p.557). Managers' and head teachers' considerations when deploying practitioners to certain roles within ECEC settings as a result of their personal experiences can make the most of the value of personal experience which has potential to reap benefits for all concerned. Role-modelling was identified by participants in this research as being instrumental when raising children and supporting parents, and applies equally in the workplace.

#### ***4. Appreciating difference through attentive listening***

This study identified the inner struggle that participants revealed when it came to appreciating difference, particularly regarding different views of raising children. A clearer understanding and respect when working with diverse family structures and practices is essential to help practitioners meet the real needs of parents in contemporary England. Research participants drew attention to the importance of time spent listening to parents to understand and appreciate their wishes. Good listening skills are vital to apply attentive listening with 'palatable respect and fascination' (Kline, 1999, p.37), and, as Rinaldi (2006) asserts, listening to difference involves 'letting go of any truths that we consider absolute' (p.37); in other words, looking beyond our own established habitus (Bourdieu, 1985; 1977) in order to support the development of the cultural capital of some families (Reay, 2000, 1998b). Therefore, I suggest that this study draws attention to the need for sounder and more appropriate training with a fresh approach to continued professional development that reflects contemporary family diversity, including learning to develop skills in listening attentively.

#### ***5. Rising to the challenges of ECEC policy across the sector when working with parents***

Ultimately however, the real issue is one of policy, and how it is translated into practice. I refer to the ambiguous call in ECEC policy to support a standardised model of 'good parenting' (DfE, 2014) which I have argued does not appreciate the diversity of contemporary family structures and values. This study shows how seven mother practitioners start from a baseline of recognising difference in their own children and responding to their needs appropriately. They share their experiences empathetically with parents to encourage self-determination; however parental autonomy conflicts with policy

rhetoric conveying a standardised middle-class parenting approach. Therefore, more research is needed to enable policy-makers to more appreciate family difference, and that bad parenting is not necessarily 'the source of virtually every social problem that afflicts our communities' (Furedi, 2014, p.viii). As Furedi (2008) argues, 'How parents behave is informed by the cultural, moral, and social influences that bear down on them' (p.188). If, as I have argued in the previous section, ECEC practitioners have opportunities to develop their understanding of contemporary family difference, then policy needs to be more explicit through informed, high quality and reliable research.

Participants identified the problems of working with parents through implementing a KPA consistently across the range of ECEC settings. Although this highlights a wider issue outside the parameters of this study, it would appear that it draws attention to a fundamental flaw in ECEC policy. An overarching curriculum framework advocating a coherent KPA across the sector cannot be delivered consistently, however hard ECEC practitioners strive to provide their best when building relationships with parents within the opportunities available to them. Although the mother practitioners in this study demonstrated how they overcame some of the problems, the logistical and bureaucratic disparities across settings render this issue constantly problematic.

### ***The contribution to knowledge***

This study has built upon and extended the recognition identified in the existing literature discussed in Chapter Two, of the value placed upon the personal experiences of mothering that many ECEC practitioners bring to their roles. Such an element of value therefore, specifically in the human virtues intrinsic in mothering that were identified by participants as essential ingredients, contribute towards better professional practice within the ECEC sector. These virtues are not necessarily exclusive to parents, but are behaviours of a generic, affective nature, and include the capacity to love, nurture and care for, to listen attentively, to be accepting, and to generate empathic understanding and responses. In this way, the contribution to knowledge adds to increasing calls for recognition of the affective element of professionalism (Davis and Degotardi, 2015; Taggart, 2014).

### ***Dissemination and further research***

In order for the contribution to knowledge to be disseminated, it is my intention to publish the findings and aspects of the methodology through peer reviewed journal articles and ECEC practitioner publications. A book would offer a unique contribution to the body of practitioner literature already available on the topic of working with parents. I suggest the range of publications would reach a wide audience of researchers, academics and practitioners working at grass roots level in settings.

Research from neuroscience needs to be developed in relation to the implications that have arisen from misinterpretation, although it is a valuable source to understanding early brain development. However, findings that suggest a 'use it or lose it' approach to parents imply that developmental damage is permanent if babies and young children are not supported by good parenting (Leadsom *et al.*, 2014). Such research needs to continue to demonstrate the more positive value in drawing upon developments in neuroscience that can inform ECEC and family policy more coherently.

Suggestions for research that could potentially build upon and extend the research findings are possible. Initially, this study represents the experiences of seven mother practitioners, and so wider studies would be needed to determine similar results. A longitudinal study, for example, could focus on the transitions of babies and young children from home, through successive PVI settings to school, to explore the continuity of support for families. A study informed by the experiences of parents themselves using ECEC provision may provide added validity to the findings. Of course, there are possibilities for comparative studies from opposing perspectives and I welcome research that attempts to present a different outcome.

Finally, the intrinsic theme of exercising empathy that emerged from this research may have similar outcomes in research in other caring disciplines, for example in nursing, care home work and counselling.

## **Critical reflection on the research process**

### ***On a psychosocial theoretical framework***

The study is located in a psychosocial theoretical framework, in which I drew from a twofold body of literature. In Chapter Two, I argued the value in considering perspectives through the lens of the social reproduction theory of Bourdieu (1986; 1985; 1977), specifically his concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. In parallel, I discussed theories rooted in psychology and psychoanalysis that argue for the recognition of an affective perspective of human development evident in attachment relations (Cozolino, 2014; Meins, 2013; Ainsworth, 1969b; Bowlby, 1969) and the application of an ethic of care (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Goldstein, 1998). Looking at the responses of the participants through a Bourdieusian lens enabled me to see how their different experiences arose from the social and cultural fields they each inhabit. For example, Wendy's experience of the approach at her antenatal classes before the birth of her first baby that empowered parents to 'understand their baby and make decisions for themselves about the way they parented' has influenced her approach. Wendy's perspective is reflected in her work with parents who she encourages to 'be in the driving seat of the development of their lives'. This key factor found in the data presents a counter-argument to political discourse and drive for ECEC practitioners to support a uniform model of good parenting (DfE, 2014), and raises implications for policy and practice.

Other structures of habitus would assume to demonstrate common characteristics among the research participants as a whole, for example in the values and beliefs reflected in the field of ECEC, and its policy and practice (DfE, 2014). However, the evidence in this study has indicated disparate variances here too. Participants raised the issue of inconsistencies in practice experienced across different types of ECEC setting, even though all have a legal requirement to offer a KPA that has been informed by attachment theory and the provision of a secure base. Similarly, although the basic tenets of mothering were identified by all participants as highly influenced by love, care and nurturing behaviours, family cultural practices and beliefs indicated variances: some traits were 'passed down', some were actively diverted and others were influenced by experience from other fields. When examining such phenomena through Bourdieu's (1977) social theory, it is to be expected therefore, that habitus is transformed over time as the interplay between the various fields



people inhabit influences their established values. Ultimately, this is visible in the conclusion that the research participants integrate their knowledge and experience from many sources to tailor their support for individual parents.

The affective nature of attachment behaviours rooted in psychology and psychoanalysis (Meins, 2013; Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1969b) and the practice of ethical care was also reflected in the participant responses. As Held (2006) asserts, women's experiences of caring requires 'feeling as well as thinking, of performing actions as well as receiving impressions, and of being aware of our connections with other persons as well as of our own sensations' (p.23). My participant Chris based her transition workshops with parents on her own emotional experience at the time of her first born child's transition to nursery and her return to work when he was a-year-old. She designed her support to include nurturing the wellbeing not only of the children but also of the parents.

The psychosocial theoretical framework in which this study is placed was reflected in the research findings, through the application of empathetic responses to working with parents evident in the mother practitioners' narratives. Calls for professional practice in ECEC to place value on the affective domain of attachment relationships with children (Taggart, 2014; Page and Elfer, 2013; Page 2011) reflect contemporary thinking, and the findings of this study add to such a proposition. Reay's (2015) concept of 'Bourdieu with feelings' that offers an extension of 'emotional capital' (Reay, 2000) would seem to offer an apt analogy for the conceptual findings of this study.

### ***On methods***

In Chapter Three I aimed to present a clear and well-defined research design. I interviewed by e-mail and analysed data using a grounded theory method in the same way that other researchers may use face-to-face interviews and thematic data analysis. Initially, I proposed a life historical approach as I was indeed asking my participants for their stories of experience. However, as the research process developed, particularly during the grounded theory analysis in which I continually compared and analysed data to make meaning, I realised that I would not be able to interpret the responses of my participants as complete stories. I found that some research participants wrote more and revealed more about their

experiences than others, that even deeper probing did not always generate fuller descriptive responses, even though I had clear answers to my questions. Having informed participants that they could write as little or as much as they desired in their e-mail responses, I had to respect that agreement. A general narrative approach was therefore chosen as the activity that would better suit the act of acquiring the data with which to answer the specific research questions.

***On using e-mail for interviewing and the ethical problems of Internet research encountered during the research process***

The choice to interview by e-mail was not taken lightly on my part, and my argument for the benefits of it as an interview method are detailed in Chapter Three. I ensured that I thoroughly researched the practical and ethical advantages and disadvantages of the method. As technological advances continually evolve and use of computer mediated communication increasingly becomes recognised as a valuable contemporary resource for gathering research data (Lee *et al.*, 2008), ethical matters are not able to be addressed in black and white. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), BERA and the University of Sheffield acknowledge this fact in their guidelines which I discussed in Chapter Three (pp.71-72) and so I needed to be transparent regarding the use of this method.

Using e-mail on an asynchronous (one-to-one) basis however considerably reduced the amount of grey area regarding online research ethics, as there was no 'posting' of data in public places, cyberspaces, forums or blogs. I was explicit in addressing issues of confidentiality with my research participants not only from my perspective on my computer but from theirs too and I e-mailed reminders about this with every communication. I addressed the optional recommendations arising from the ethical review procedure (*Appendix One, p.162*) to the best of my ability to ensure that participants were protected from distress and that I was fulfilling my role as an ethical researcher. To this end I was direct with potential research participants in the Information Sheet (*Appendix Two, p.163*). Therefore once participants had given their informed consent to take part, they were agreeing to do so in the knowledge that they understood what the interviews and process entailed. However, it would be naïve as a researcher to assume 100% certainty of this fact,

so during the interview process if participants had given sensitive and emotive information, I ensured that I checked their emotional wellbeing with them on reply.

For example, Chris described the process of reliving her experiences of deep angst on her return to work and separation from her son as '*cathartic*'. Losing Sara as a research participant after the first interview cycle was, on reflection, something that I learned from. Having assured potential participants that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason, I followed my agreed process of re-sending interview questions to the letter, eventually confirming with her by e-mail my acceptance of her withdrawal. The fact that she responded positively to my later request to use the responses that I had received from her for reporting my findings reassured me that she had been able to make her choice to withdraw, and whilst I had ethically honoured that, I will never know the reason why she made that choice. Further interview responses from her may have contributed more to the overall outcome of the research. It is fair to add therefore that I may have been fortunate that I only had one withdrawal, and I acknowledge the risk involved in using e-mail as an interview method. However, through the invitation to take part in the research posted on the Early Years Foundation Stage Forum website (<http://eyfs.info/home>) in which I was explicit that interviews would be by e-mail, it is fair comment that this method appealed to those who already engaged with technology and contributing to online fora.

Sara's withdrawal aside, I found the interview process by e-mail exciting and very informative. I am not sure that I would not have generated the amount of data that I did had we held face-to-face interviews, where respondents have to act immediately to questions without time of their own making in which to reflect. Given a place and time of their own choosing in which to respond, and indeed my own space too, in which I was constantly analysing and making sense of the data, together with the 'anonymity' factor of being invisible, I can associate with the literature in Chapter Three that I did indeed reap rich data. As the researcher/researched relationships grew, I noticed little anecdotes in responses, for example many used the words '*... I'm rambling...*', and '*... I'm waffling ...*' and sometimes '*... not sure if I've answered your question correctly!*' Interestingly these examples frequently related to some relevant deep reflection. When responses came back containing typos and misspelt words I could feel the speed and urgency that they wanted to

respond with – whether this be a time factor issue or the need for a message to be heard. When the interview process with my research participants came to a close, several of them told me they had enjoyed the research, with one confirming she felt sad that it had come to the end. In sum, I found the process of interviewing through the medium of e-mail rewarding and revealing.

### ***On constructivist grounded theory analysis***

I wrote in Chapter Three that I had not initially intended to use a grounded theory method to analyse the research data. On realisation that I was conducting comparative analysis from the start, a key component of grounded theory, I knew that I needed to research the method thoroughly to understand what I felt at the time was a complex, ever-changing and contested area. I read widely and critically on grounded theory as I accepted the realisation that I was indeed employing a constructivist grounded theory approach to analyse the data I was accumulating. As my understanding grew, I ensured that I demystified the terminology to simplify and apply my own stance to it in relation to this study in Chapter Four (*Table 4.1, pp.82*). Once I had grasped the method and justified its use, I found it conducive to coding the data and ensuring that I did not miss any important issues ‘hiding’ in the texts that I received from my research participants. The fact that I summarised salient issues linked to the research inquiry with each interview cycle ensured my interpretation of the stories I was receiving was correct. Using e-mail enabled me to delve deeper, for example when one response compared with another but not in quite the same way, or when I wanted more information to confirm my understanding. The mapping that I did thus reflected the deeper responses and helped to cement the synergy between categories and the core category. I am not convinced that this could have been achieved through other methods of analysis to the same degree. Overall, the method was well-suited to the study and the fact that I had to educate myself widely as a novice grounded theorist, my own appreciation and learning of the method has been immense.

## Closing personal reflection upon my doctoral learning journey

I conclude this thesis with an extract from my reflective journal:

**Research Journal entry 24<sup>th</sup> September 2015:** During the course of my doctoral journey I have faced a series of personal family challenges that impacted upon my research and its natural flow. These included natural life processes common to all families, but also some experiences more testing to confront. I am a firm believer however, that such experiences, though not obvious at the time, have made me a stronger person. At one stage I had to take a six month leave of absence at a crucial time when I was writing up my report of the study. During this six months my focus was purely on the reason for being granted a leave of absence, so when I returned to my study I had to reacquaint myself with my work to date, which meant reading everything I had written, including the notes in my research journal, re-reading and updating the body of literature, and learning how to focus once more on my intention to tell the stories of my participants. The motivation and drive came from inner strength I had accumulated. Coming back to it after such a long break only served to provide a new reflective perspective that highlighted new thoughts and concepts that may not have happened had I continued without the break. One of these was the realisation that my study was situated in a psychosocial conceptual framework, which I feel strengthened my whole research project. A mere reference to Bourdieu and cultural capital in my first draft instigated further exploration of Bourdieu's social theory which developed my learning and understanding of the findings from a study that was at the time, I feel in retrospect, lacking in substance and 'doctorateness' at the time.

I have learned so much on this journey: how big a step it is from study at Masters level, and what a huge task it is to carry out and articulate your own piece of research that indeed, reflects 'doctorateness'. My thesis changed several times as I came to terms with presenting new concepts, and now as I am on the brink of completion I feel a humble sense of indebtedness to my research participants for driving my enthusiasm along the way.

Based on the findings of this study, I can confidently state that for these seven mother practitioners their personal mothering experiences *have* influenced and informed their working practice with parents.

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## Appendix One

### Approval of ethical review



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

The  
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Dear Janet

**Re: A Life Historical study of Early Years Practitioners' views of their experiences of mothering and the influence on their professional role working with parents.**

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project. The reviewers have now considered this and have agreed that your application be approved with the following optional amendments.

(Please see below reviewers' comments)

**7. Approved with the following suggested, optional amendments (i.e. it is left to the discretion of the applicant whether or not to accept the amendments and, if accepted, the ethics reviewers do not need to see the amendments):**

1. Life historical research data is not anonymous or aggregated; the student will need to anonymise it after it has been collected.
2. Specific safeguards should be put in place to protect participants – the researcher will have no way of knowing if they are distressed. (It is outside my remit as a reviewer to comment on the research design per se – so this comment is made in relation to the ethical rather than methodological issues, however – revisiting the method chosen to include some face to face meetings may dispel my concerns for participants here.) The student should discuss this further with the supervisor.
3. Specific issues with regard to the ethics of internet inquiry will need to be addressed.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Jacquie Gillott  
Programme Secretary

## Appendix Two

### Participant Information Sheet

**1. Research Project Title:**

A Life Historical study of Early Years Practitioners' views of their experiences of 'mothering' and the influence on their professional role working with parents.

**2. Invitation paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

**3. What is the project's purpose?**

The project is part of my doctoral study with the University of Sheffield. I want to find out the extent to which early years practitioners may use their own experiences as parents in their role working with parents in a professional capacity. A life historical approach draws upon participants' stories of past events and the impact that such stories have had on the lives of the participant.

**4. Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because you are both a birth parent and an early years practitioner and have demonstrated an interest in my research. Life historical research necessarily intends to draw from a small sample of participants in order to explore the research issues in depth. I am particularly interested to identify no more than ten participants, who work in a range of roles across the early years sector, for example as a childminder, a pre-school practitioner, a nursery practitioner, a Children's Centre worker or an early years teacher. It does not matter whether you are fully qualified or training, male or female, young or mature. Ideally I would like at least two fathers to participate in this research.

**5. Do I have to take part?**

Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary – it is completely up to you. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will need to give your consent on the enclosed form. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

**6. What will happen to me if I take part?**

I am intending to complete the research project in two years (by August 2013). Participants will need to have access to reliable and regular e-mail, as this is the method I will be using to acquire my information. After you have given your consent to take part, I will e-mail you an initial informal questionnaire that will tell me a little bit about you. You will complete this online and e-mail it back to me. The process will then be set in motion, and I will be inviting you to tell your stories of your experiences as a parent and how, if at all, you draw on these experiences in your work with the parents of the children you work with. You can write as little or as much as you want to, and in your own style. After reading your stories I will be asking you to elaborate or describe something in more detail that you may have mentioned, thus setting up a continual process of gathering information. I will be asking participants to provide their stories from receipt of consent until the end of the summer next year (2012). There may also be times after this time when I am analysing all the information, that I may come back to you to clarify particular points.

If you agree to take part in my research I would ask that you ensure you have the systems in place and the time to check e-mails regularly and respond within a reasonable time, for example within three days, to questions I may ask.

**7. What do I have to do?**

Using e-mail means that you do not have to change your lifestyle – you can choose a time when it is easy for you to write your stories in the privacy of a space of your own choosing. You can take time to think about what you want to write, or alternatively write immediately with the thoughts that come into your head. There are no right or wrong responses, it is your individual story that interests me.

**8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Because you will be writing in the comfort of your own space, there are very few disadvantages to your health, safety and wellbeing. You may find that you write about sensitive issues that cause you a little distress to remember, but it is entirely up to you how much or how little you decide to share with me. If you do find that something causes you emotional distress or if there are any other risks that come to light during the research, I ask that you let me know immediately in order for us to resolve the issue together so that your wellbeing is restored and protected. It is important to inform you that although it is highly unlikely, in the event of deeper issues of a criminal nature being shared, or anything that compromises the safeguarding of children, then as a responsible researcher I will be

duty-bound to stop the research and to pass the information to the appropriate authorities as is necessary.

**9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that your story will provide me with an interesting contribution of how some early years practitioners work with parents.

**10. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

Whilst it is my intention to complete this research, sometimes unforeseen events happen and if the study was to stop you will be fully informed.

**11. What if something goes wrong?**

As a participant hopefully you should not experience adverse events arising from the research process, but if something does go wrong there are systems in place to support you. If you wish to make a complaint, you should first contact my research supervisor, Dr. Jools Page, on 0114 222 8103 or by e-mail, [j.m.page@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.page@sheffield.ac.uk). If you remain unsatisfied the complaint will be passed on to the University's Registrar and Secretary.

**12. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential, except in those cases as identified above. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. I intend to use a fictitious name throughout the reporting of the research. There will be no e-mail addresses revealed in the completed research study.

You will be asked to give your permission on the consent form for me, my research supervisor and the university research team to have access to your responses, but these will be made anonymous, and you will not be identified.

All information about you and your responses will be stored appropriately on my password protected personal computer, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. No other members of my household will be able to access it.



**13. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

It is my intention to publish the results of the research and I would like to gain your approval now to do so.

**14. Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is part of my EdD study with the University of Sheffield and not funded by an external organisation.

**15. Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This study has been ethically reviewed by the University of Sheffield's School of Education ethical review process.

**16. Contact for further information**

For further information you should contact me in the first instance. However, if you wanted any further information you can contact my research supervisor Dr. Jools Page, on 0114 222 8103 or by e-mail, [j.m.page@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.page@sheffield.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking part in this research project